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I do like them but I don't watch them: Preschoolers' Use of Age as an Accounting Device in Consumption Evaluations

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Abstract

This paper derives from a broader study of children's consumer culture, specifically an investigation into how preschoolers employ commercial discourses as the building blocks of social selves and relations. Age-based repertoires are found to colour the various discourses produced. 'Age' is conceptualised as something that is made sense of for and by children through their utilisation of toys, media, consumables and other commercial artefacts. The 'choosing child' is addressed in empirical terms to reveal the social significance of 'doing' consumption related evaluations in the focus group setting. A CA-informed discourse analytic approach is utilised to focus on one aspect of 'doing' age in focus group talk, that is, the way in which age is employed as an accounting device for the evaluation of 'Teletubbies', a BBC television programme aimed at very young children, as illustrated in one closely transcribed 'assessment sequence'. 'Doing' consumption evaluations proved complex in this setting; while age-based selves were established in-situ, meanings around 'Teletubbies', specifically the age at which it is acceptable to like and or watch it remain unresolved, rendering its social currency as an age-defining product somewhat in flux.

Keywords

Preschool consumer, Age, Consumption Evaluations, Discourse Analysis, Social Currency.

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INTRODUCTION

By the time a child attends preschool[1] chronological age has become a defining component of self-concept. Preschoolers have passed through a myriad of developmental milestones, many of which have been accomplished through the utilisation of age-graded material objects from consumer culture. Birthdays, 'a visible marker of age awareness' (Cook, 2004a:99), have been celebrated and accompanied by festivities and gift giving by family and friends. This paper derives from a broader study which explores preschoolers' production of consumer selves and relations through talk-in-interaction around the material artefacts of consumer culture in a focus group setting. The paper begins with the premise that consumption evaluations are fluid and shifting social constructs produced through talk-in-interaction and not inner mental states revealed through language. The term 'consumption evaluations' is used to encapsulate a number of consumer concepts including preference, desire and choice, which, while constituting separate conceptual entities, are examined together for the purposes of this paper. A CA-informed discourse analysis[2] has revealed an age-based repertoire of talk-in-interaction which weaves its way through the discourse produced. Age is first introduced as a *marked* social category by me (the moderator) as I ask each child for their name and age during the ice-breaking phase of the focus group. The age category is subsequently produced and made salient by the children themselves intermittently and for various social ends throughout the period of interaction. This paper focuses on one aspect of 'doing' age in focus group talk, that is, the way in which age is employed as an accounting device for stated consumption evaluations. The paper aims to contribute to an empirical discussion on the 'choosing child'(Cook, 2004a). The first section outlines the major theoretical threads and key concepts informing this paper. The second section overviews the methodological approach taken. The third section presents a detailed analysis of the data extract selected for discussion and finally some conclusions are drawn.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The study from which this paper derives is situated within Corsaro's [1997/2005] 'new' sociology of childhood. His sociological perspective is influenced by the 'new paradigm' in childhood studies (see James and Prout, 1990, Qvortrup et al., 1994), the biggest theoretical legacy of which remains the re-conceptualisation of children from 'social becomings' to 'social beings'. Corsaro critiques linear age-stage models of children's socialisation, instead arguing that development is a 'productive-reproductive process' which sees children 'enter into a social nexus and, by interacting and negotiating with others, establish understandings that become fundamental social knowledge on which they continually build' (Corsaro and Eder, 1990:217). The 'new' thinking encapsulated in this paradigm shift which took place over twenty years ago, has led to a re-conceptualisation of 'childhood' itself, which is now understood to be a structural form and a social phenomenon rather than a period of life (Qvortrup et al., 1994). Childhood is viewed as brought into being by children's negotiation and manipulation of material, linguistic and interactional resources with other children and adults. Children are thus understood to 'do' childhood and to play out social roles that vary across time and socio-cultural space.

Marketing approaches to the child consumer while increasingly focused on children as 'knowing, meaning-making beings' (Cook: 2009:279) have not abandoned age-stage socialisation models (Roedder-John, 1999, McNeal, 2007). The chronological model of childhood has been utilised and expanded upon by marketers as 'new' age-stage conceptualisations have been added to the conceptual framework, most notably and recently the 'Tween' category (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003, Siegal, Coffey et al. 2004). Age-grading remains a key marketing segmentation tool for toy producers. For example, the online 'Lego' store carves childhood into six distinctive age categories (see http://shop.lego.com/ByAge/) and the online 'Toys R Us' UK store offers seven distinctive age-based browsing categories (see http://www.toysrus.co.uk/browse/product/toys). This paper conceptualises chronological age as just one

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[1] Preschool children are between three and four years old.
[2] CA is the conventional shorthand for Conversation Analysis (Sacks, 1995). I'm using the term 'CA-informed discourse analysis to describe a form of D.A. that is heavily influenced by and utilises many of the principles and applications of CA including the Jeffersonian transcription system.

aspect of childhood and not the central defining characteristic of childhood. 'Age' is understood as something that is made meaningful for and by children through their utilisation of toys, media, consumables and other commercial artefacts.

Corsaro (1997:92) argues that much previous work on children's 'culture' saw culture defined either in functionalist terms as 'shared values, beliefs and artefacts' or in cognitive terms as 'a set of organising principles that people keep in their heads and that guide behaviour'. He defines children's peer cultures as 'a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers' (1997:95). According to Corsaro, a deeper understanding of children's culture, is garnered not through an examination of individual children's internalisation of adult skills, but, through a focus on their cultural routines. Corsaro (2005:131) states in the second edition of his book that studies of childhood consumer culture, with some notable exceptions such as the work of Stephen Kline and Ellen Seiter, 'only rarely and very narrowly explore children's actual use, refinement and transformation of symbolic and material goods within peer cultures.' This paper conceptualises the 'doing' of consumption evaluations by preschoolers as a type of 'cultural routine', the resources for which are drawn from the 'stuff' of consumer culture. The next section will discuss some of the work that has addressed the social significance of children's consumer commodities.

MATERIAL ARTEFACTS AS SOCIAL CURRENCY

Slater (1997:168) views consumption as an open-ended process. The meanings of goods are understood to be negotiated and not simply determined by producers. In a somewhat similar vein, Douglas and Isherwood (1996:xvi) emphasise the communicative aspects of consumer goods arguing that 'goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges'. While their theorisations of consumer culture do not discuss the 'child consumer' explicitly, a lacking that is reflective of consumption studies more broadly (see Martens at al., 2004 and Cook, 2008 for discussions on 'the missing child' in consumption studies), they form a useful backdrop to the focus of this paper. Here, an assumption is made that preschool consumers use goods or commodities to make sense of their social worlds and relationships.

Serious engagement with children's consumer culture as produced by children themselves necessitates an examination of what and how consumer goods mean to them. Beryl Langer's (2002) work on the 'commodification' of childhood sees her re-visit Margaret Mead's (1928) account of child-rearing practices in the Manus village of Peri in the Admirality Islands, North of New Guinea. Langer draws a parallel between the centrality of the boat to the production of material life in Manus culture and the centrality of the shopping trolley to life in consumer societies today. Langer argues that in the same way that Manus children had to learn 'to negotiate their watery world', children in consumer societies must 'learn to shop' (2002:64). For Langer, learning to shop involves developing the ability to make choices and be discerning in those choices. Making choices is an activity that is viewed through a sociological lens, thus bringing into focus the ways in which the material artefacts of consumer culture represent social currency for child consumers. Langer and Farrar (2003:117) describe fast food, television, computer games, 'commoditoys'(Langer,1989) and brand-logo clothing as the 'taken-for-granted currency of social exchange' in Australian childhood. They found that children displayed detailed knowledge of American TV programmes including 'The Simpsons' and concluded that while the programmes might be globally available, the experience of watching them is highly localised and knowledge around them becomes part of the 'shared language through which peer culture is affirmed and reproduced' (2003:119). Their views reflect the arguments made by Seiter (1993) a decade previously. Seiter argues that 'as a mass culture, toys and television give children a medium of communication ... a lingua franca' (1993: 49). More recent studies by Chin (2001) and Waerdahl (2005) support Seiter's claim that children must learn how to interpret consumer goods in terms of their 'status value' and that children's desires for involvement in consumer culture cannot be explained only through 'greed, hedonism or passivity' but rather through the

'desire for community and for a utopian freedom from adult authority, seriousness, and goal directedness' (1993:49).

Pugh (2009) examines the social consequences attached to children's consumer choice in her study of children's consumer cultures in California. She argues that children and parents from totally different socio-economic circumstances shared similar hopes and fears in the context of commodified childhoods. Children desire to *belong* in peer groups and parents want them to experience *belonging* [my emphasis]. Pugh (2009) reveals some of the complexity attached to conceptualising material artefacts as social currency. She did not find children's consumption desires to be based simply around competitive display and status seeking behaviour but coined the phrase 'economy of dignity', to describe the realms within which 'children transform particular goods and experiences into a form of scrip, tokens of value suddenly fraught with meaning' (2009:7). Such scrips did not necessarily require actual ownership; her empirical analysis revealed that 'what made something count as scrip was that it allowed entry into the ongoing conversations of his or her peers', but equally what counted as scrip, was 'fluid and dynamic' (2009:55). This results in an exchange rate which is forever in flux and which varies across several different economies of dignity, for example, at school, in the neighbourhood or at an after-school club. Children made the most symbolic value out of 'claiming access to popular culture' (2009:56) and that access came in many shapes and forms from actually owning and using to knowing about various heavily advertised objects of popular appeal

> 'Children relied on these pre-packaged symbols to establish their claims to the community based on such shared values as being cool, savvy, popular, older than their years (but not an adult), and not poor; this list captured some of the primary social anxieties of these children, who were working hard not to be mistaken for being unaware, awkward, or unable to afford what others had' (2009:57).

Access to consumer objects and experiences of value, namely shopping in upscale stores, flying on airplanes, visiting exclusive resorts was also identified by Goodwin (2006), as something that was utilised by ten year old girls to differentiate themselves from others, and, ultimately build and sustain cliques. Goodwin used an ethnographic approach to study the lived embodied practices through which forms of inclusion and exclusion in a girls' peer group are achieved over time in a progressive Southern Californian school characterised by mixed ethnicities and socio-economic groups. She observed that children use dramatic play to make evident 'not only the categories of person which are important to them, and their social positionings vis-à-vis one another, but also their relationship to the larger consumer culture that envelopes them' (2006:186).She observed girls describing fantasy car ownership as they engaged in a game of 'playing house'

> 'Through interactive games of this sort girls construct a shared vision of the world. They establish what objects and events in the world are to be considered of value, and display who has access to them. ….. … As in other more quotidian conversation they are involved in, comparisons made with respect to cars provide a way of subtly ranking one another. With each turn judgements can be made about someone's taste and ability to make appropriate discriminations' (2006:188).

Goodwin (2006:186) cites Johnson (2004) who while researching in the same school found similar understandings of socio-economic distinction with respect to consumer products evidenced in the interactions of four-year-olds. They made distinctions about whose lunch box was "cool" (one-of-a-kind decorated boxes purchased at exclusive stores) and whose was not, and argued that identical labels ("cool" or "not cool") could be applied to the owners of the lunch boxes as well.

All of the work outlined above presents children as socially competent beings and emphasises the active and interactive components of being a child consumer and 'doing' the consumption aspects of childhood including demonstrating ones level of access to consumer culture. The expression of tastes, desires and evaluations of and around material consumer culture is used as social currency between children; producing the 'socially acceptable' evaluative judgements in interaction is *as* if not *more* important than owning the material possessions themselves. This paper views 'doing' consumption evaluation as social

action carried out by the 'choosing child' (Cook, 2004a). The next section will define the 'choosing child' in the context of this paper.

RESEARCHING THE CHOOSING CHILD

Cook's (2004a) historical perspective on the rise of the child consumer includes detailed analysis of Grumbine's (1938) '*Reaching Juvenile Markets*'. It is clear from this manual targeted at manufacturers and advertisers that the children's market has been understood and structured in terms of chronological age for more than a century. Cook notes Grumbine's argument that 'to know the child is to know the age of the child', as the child's propensity towards and style of self-expression was believed to vary across the childhood age spectrum (2004a:77). Cook argues that the introduction of the 'toddler' (an infant aged between one and three years) as a subject and merchandising category in the 1930's signified a turning point in children's consumer culture. The standing, talking and most importantly *choosing* [my emphasis] toddler was substantiated and personified through popular culture icons such as 'Shirley Temple'. The toddler, thus, arrived on the scene 'already a consumer – a choosing desiring subject' (2004a:94) This child as 'choosing subject' was to form the bedrock of the consumer culture of childhood because it appeals to deeply held beliefs about subjects and subjectivity under market capitalism including 'the sovereignty of the consumer, individualism and economic rationality' (2004a:69).

The child consumer as 'choosing subject' increasingly dominated marketing discourse towards the end of the twentieth century. The late 1990's and first decade of the twenty first century saw the 'child's view' become 'a commodity' in and of itself as made evident through the emergence of research divisions and entire firms dedicated to the 'children's knowledge market' (Cook, 2009, p.276). Cook traces that development back to the work of marketing academics/consultants citing Guber and Berry (1993) and McNeal (1992). Their combined experience of using qualitative research to examine the 'child consumer' advised marketers and advertisers of the insights and knowledge that could be gained through this direct interaction using one-to-one interviews and focus groups. In so doing, Cook believes they offered 'a kind of cultural permission to market directly to children' (2009:275). The role of the qualitative market researcher as implied by Guber and Berry, McNeal and other practitioners revolves around uncovering 'children's ways of knowing and thus their 'true' un-coerced, unarticulated (and perhaps previously unarticulatable) needs and desires' for the purposes of giving children the opportunity to 'select appropriate products', and marketers the opportunity to utilise the knowledge garnered to provide offerings that would satisfy children's needs (Cook, 2009, p.276). This discourse celebrates the 'choosing child' construct as empowered in market society.

Space does not permit a discussion of the either/or debate between those that see the child consumer as easily manipulated and exploited by the market (Linn 2004, Schor, 2004, Thomas, 2007) and those that see the child consumer as empowered by the market (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003 is just one example). In any case, the research from which this paper derives is rooted beyond the 'either/or dichotomy' (Cook: 2004b, p149). This paper thus attempts to move away from the debate about whether 'choice' is empowering or 'exploitative' and instead focuses on an area that has received less attention, that is how 'choice' is accomplished in interaction and more importantly the extent to which stated desires, preferences and evaluations are utilised for age-related social ends.

A CA-informed discourse analytic approach is employed to address 'the choosing child' through an empirical lens in a focus group context (see Sparrman, 2009 and Keller and Kalmus, 2009 for other DA work on children's consumer culture). The approach taken here challenges the idea that language or talk-in-interaction provides access to inner cognitive states and instead addresses the 'cognitivist vocabulary' utilised by speakers as performing a variety of social actions which may be inconsistent across time and situations. Puchta and Potter (2004:15) argue that the social psychological legacy of the attitude concept as something that is static, measurable and observable in verbal, behavioural and psychological reactions remains prevalent in most focus group work today. They describe the concept as 'a product in the social

science supermarket that is well passed its sell by date!' instead conceptualising attitudes as fluid and contextual (2004:22). In doing so, they support Billig's (1996) argument that attitudes are performed not pre-formed. This paper, in a similar vein, views the concepts of desire, preference and evaluation as fluid and contextual and thus performed through interaction. Wilkinson (2006:55) argues that taking part in any social interaction "entails producing talk in order to *do* something: to corroborate, to challenge, to boast, to tease, ... our contributions to a conversation are 'occasioned' by what has gone before – especially just before as this provides the sequential context for our talk". Where cognitive states such as desires, preferences and evaluations are made relevant through talk-in-interaction these are understood as *social actions* which are employed to 'do' interactional work, and in line with Woofitt[3] (2005:116) are 'oriented to interaction and inferential concerns'. It is now pertinent to overview and define the analytical concepts that underpin the findings presented below.

ASSESSMENT SEQUENCES IN INTERACTION

Heritage (1984:259) argues that conversation is structured by an organisation of action which is implemented on a turn-by-turn basis. A context of publicly displayed and continuously updated intersubjective understandings is systematically sustained by means of this organisation. Schegloff (2007: 3) refers to a stretch of talk in which a course of action gets initiated, worked through and brought to a closure as a 'sequence'. This paper derives from a broader study in which desires, preferences, evaluation and other actions related to consumer choice are produced in discrete sequences of interaction across the transcribed focus group talk. The analytical discussion that follows focuses on both the 'doing of the talk' (traditionally the concern of a CA perspective, Sacks, 1995) and on 'what the talk is doing' (the concern of a DA perspective, Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The 'doing' of assessments has received a considerable amount of attention both in the field of conversation analysis generally and in the context of focus group research. The terms evaluations and assessments are often used interchangeably and are understood not to be 'ready-made cognitive objects' but rather they are worked up and performed to suit the social action being accomplished (Puchta and Potter, 2004:20). Pomerantz argues that 'although assessments may be seen as products of participation in social activities, the proferring of them is part and parcel of participating in such activities'. They are thus 'occasioned conversational events with sequential constraints' (1984:58).

Puchta and Potter (2004:15) argue that assessments may be constructed and organised in particular ways to fit the interaction, for example, a delay can signal caution in making an assessment. They also note the variation evident in people's evaluations, because 'the people doing the talking are doing different things with the evaluations' depending on the context (2004:26). Goodwin (2006:195) posits that the activity of assessing an object entails the expression of a positive or negative evaluation by a speaker through the use of contrastive verbs such as 'like' and 'hate' and 'statements containing assessment adverbs and adjectives which position the participant with respect to the object'. An examination of the language utilised by speakers, provides ways to understand the significance of issues, popular culture or material objects to those speakers in a social context. Her analysis of assessment sequences in her work on girls' social worlds, revealed that the activity of assessment provides a resource, with which speakers can display to one another 'a congruent or divergent view of the events they encounter in their phenomenal world' (2006:183). Analysis of assessment sequences brings a number of conversational features into focus including preference structures and the accounting device as well as interpretative repertoires and subject positioning.

Preference Structures and the Accounting Device
The concept of preference is used to indicate a 'normative ranking of different responses exhibited in the organization of talk' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:83). The second part of a two-part sequence or an

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[3] Woofitt (2005: 113)states that 'Discursive Psychology is a thorough reworking of the subject matter of psychology – it seeks to analyse reports of mental states and discourse in which mental states become relevant, as social actions oriented to interactional and inferential concerns'.

adjacency pair[4], that is, a response to a previous utterance can be ranked as preferred or dispreferred. These terms are not intended to refer to the 'private desires or psychological proclivities of individual speakers', they are descriptive of the way these responses are 'done' in ordinary talk (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999:302). Heritage (1984:267) defines 'preferred' actions, for example, acceptance of an invitation, as those which are characteristically performed straightforwardly and without delay, and 'dispreferred' actions, for example, declining an invitation, as those which are delayed, qualified and accounted for. Schegloff (2007:59) argues that what he calls 'plus responses'(preferred) lend themselves to formulations as agreement, an alignment with the first pair part and minus responses (dispreferred) as disagreements, a distancing from the first pair part. This alignment or distancing is not with the speaker of the first part per se, although it may be that as well, but it mainly refers to the course of action the first pair part is designed to implement (2007:59). The doing of evaluation is an activity that prevails in focus group talk around children's consumer culture. The question of whether children 'like' something is one for which the preferred response is a positive 'yes' and the dispreferred response is a negative 'no'. Theory on preference structures as outlined here suggests that where a negative assessment is provided, an account is then required or demanded by the moderator but where the preferred response is provided an account is not expected. The term accounting refers to an occasion of talk where an individual accounts for something, that is, provides an explanation or a justification for something (Goodwin, 2006). This paper focuses on how 'age' is used to provide the substance of an account and hence age is referred to as an 'accounting device'. In summary, evaluations' assess things and 'accounts' justify assessments.

Interpretative Repertoires and Subject Positioning

Utilisation of the DA lens provides for a close examination of the substance of the 'accounts' produced in assessment sequences. Discourse analysis does not deny the involvement of psychic processes in the generation of accounts by individuals, but it also does not provide an interpretive framework for them (Alldred and Burman, 2005:180). Language is understood to provide 'subject positions' which people occupy rather than fixed perspectives. Subject positions are fluid and variable both within and between accounts. Some yield more power than others and are differentially available to people by virtue of their social and institutional positioning, with age and generational hierarchies being key limiting dimensions

> 'As we speak, we are positioned and position ourselves in particular ways which serve certain functions' (Alldred and Burman, 2005:179).

Potter and Wetherell (1987:146) coined the term 'interpretative repertoire' to describe what they called 'systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena'. Repertoires are relatively consistent and bounded discursive themes that describe a person's version of events or account of their own motivations or beliefs. Repertoires, serve to position people within specific social contexts, for example an age-based repertoire in talk serves to construct oneself and/or others in chronological terms. However, speakers utilise varying repertoires across sequences of interaction and thus positioning is a fluid process that occasionally sees speakers place themselves in contradictory positions across the course of social interaction.

Pugh (2009:51) asserts poetically that children shape the relationships that form their environment through talk

> 'Children use talk to establish, if only momentarily, who is part of their world; their conversations are like a country pond into which they dive – sometimes entering with a nary splash, other times grabbing both ankles and launching themselves in a 'cannonball'. They make connections to each other through the common water swirling about them, through talk about the things important to their lives, about puffballs or movies, sneakers or school.'

The next part of the paper will outline the methodological framework behind this study before moving on to the analytical discussion and conclusions.

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[4]Ten Have (2007:217) defines an adjacency pair as a two-part sequence in which the first part makes relevant the production of a second pair-part of the type suggested by the first part to follow immediately after the first one, as in question-answer, greeting-greeting, invitation-acceptance/declination.

METHODOLOGY

The data presented below is taken from a project that comprised fourteen activity-based focus groups (see Freeman, 2009 for a more detailed applied discussion on activity-based focus group methodology) with pre-schoolers aged between two and five years, held in a number of settings including privately run Montessori schools and community based preschools in Dublin, Ireland. The research focuses on how preschoolers utilise the language of consumer culture as a resource in the production of social selves and relations in the local context of the focus group setting. All transcripts were produced utilising a programme called Transana[5] . The talk was transcribed using the transcription conventions detailed in appendix A. Sequences identified for closer analysis were labelled and saved as individual clips. Each sequence was coded using multiple keywords again facilitated through the programme. In practice the clipping and coding process was iterative and fairly rudimentary but it facilitated in the identification of the prominent conversational features and the relationship between these features and the accomplishment of social action. The main substance of the talk analysed centred on the material artefacts of children's consumer culture including characters from children's television, fast food and drink products, toys and movies.

This research uses a CA informed discourse analytic methodology. Some of the literature on focus group research emphasises issues surrounding the potential bias and risk of manipulation evident within focus group talk, for example, Litosseliti (2003:23) argues that participants 'may not be truthful' or 'may tell half-truths'. This is irrelevant for the discourse analytical researcher who is not in the business of seeking out truth but rather argues that truths are constructed in the here and now of interaction and are fluid in structure. CA (Sacks, 1995) is concerned with the intricacies of turn by turn interaction and employs a special transcription system in an effort to produce highly textured transcripts. The CA lens brings various conversational features into focus including (dis)agreements, assessments, stories and accounts. This paper addresses the accounting device as a conversational feature of assessment sequences produced by participants for various age-related social ends. As preschoolers utilise the accounting device to provide justification for their evaluations or assessments in talk-in-interaction around consumer culture, they engage in the production of consumer selves and relations. This paper focuses on the construction of 'age-based' selves and relations.

ANALYSIS

The extract chosen for analysis is taken from a focus group comprising four children, Josh (4), Cian (3), Millie (3) and Ciara (4). The extract is an example of an assessment sequence as described above. This activity saw me, the moderator, invite children to select 'decorations' from a large selection of small velcro-backed laminated cut outs from toy catalogues[6], with which, to decorate a felt-covered Christmas tree shaped card. At the end of the activity each child is invited to talk the rest of the group through the decorations they have chosen for their tree. The aim of the activity and of the 'show and tell' exercise that followed was to generate talk-in-interaction around the material artefacts of consumer culture. In line with a discourse analytic perspective, I was not motivated by an interest in what sort of toys preschoolers 'really' liked but rather how preschoolers utilised them as resources in social interaction.

I am moderating this group and I ask Josh if I may take a photograph of his completed collage to which he responds that he has to talk me through his choices first. This signals the beginning of the assessment sequence which centres on the topic of Teletubbies[7]. Josh produces a complex account in response to a

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[5] Transana is open source software for the transcription of video and audio data (see http://www.transana.org/)
[6] The selection thus reflected a snap-shot of the artefacts of consumer culture available at the time the study was conducted.

[7] Teletubbies is a BBC TV series aimed at preschool viewers. It includes four colourful main characters who live in Tellytubbyland and a sun who has a baby's face and makes baby noises during the show. Linn (2004:41) in a critical discussion of the manner in which the product was marketed to babies in the US cites figures from itsy bitsy Entertainment the programmes distributor for North and South America which estimated that the programme was reaching 1 billion toddlers worldwide in 2001.

question from me about whether he 'likes' 'Teletubbies'. A detailed analysis of this sequence will follow the presentation of the text.

Extract A

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1.02 mins

        686   Olivia:        °Excellent° that's great thanks Cian Josh >can I take a
                             picture of ↑your one ↓now<
        687   Josh:          No- I- have to tell you first
        688   Olivia:        Fir- tell me first [okay]
        689   Josh:                             [ I  ] ha::ve Scooby Doo figure
                             (1.5) Fifi (1.0)(with) Flower Tots Fifi (.) >Fifi and
                             the Flower Tots< Teletubbies Postman Pat (1.5) >there
                             you have it<
→       690   Olivia:        >Very good< (1.0) and do you ↑like Telletubb↓ies
→       691   Josh:          Well em- I- I don't watch them but I I do ↑like them
                             but I dont' watch them.
→       692   Olivia:        Why do you not watch them.
→       693   Josh:          'Cos I'm a ↑big boy now.
→       694   Olivia:        Oh
→       695   Josh:          Only ba↓bies watch them. but I do like them but I .hh I
                             don't [really watch them]
        696   Cian:          [I   love    care ] bears
→       697   Olivia:        Do you ↑like Teletubbies ↓Millie
→       698   Millie:        °Em::::: yeah° ((looks to Josh))
→       699   Olivia:        Do you watch them sometimes
→       700   Millie:        °Yeah°=
        701   Olivia:        =Yeah
→       702   Claire:        I watch them sometimes too
→       703   Olivia:        °Great°
        704   Cian:          I love (.) scooby doo
        705   Olivia:        Okay(.)did I take a picture [>I didn't take one yet
                              did I< ](.) =
        706   Cian:          [          (   )              ]
        707   Olivia:        = >'Cos you were tellin' me first< so I'll take one
                             now?
        708   Cian:          Noddy ( )
        709   Olivia:        °You hold it for me there that's great (.) well done
                             just turn it this way so that I can see it with the
                             camera (1.5)
        710   Josh:          ((Holds tree to camera))
        711   Olivia:        Very good
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Description

One of the major principles of Conversation Analysis is that conversation is organised in adjacency pairs as described above. Questions require answers and dispreferred responses require accounts. The evaluation sequence depicted here begins at line 690, when, following Josh's presentation of his completed collage, I ask him if he *likes* Teletubbies. Josh is careful when producing the required response to this question and hesitates thus buying some time with his 'well eh' (line 691). He then produces a 'preferred response' to the question of 'liking' when he affirms that he does like them, however, and I think interestingly, he sandwiches his affirmation between a repeated claim that serves to distance him from the product, that is, that he doesn't 'watch them'. His affirmation of 'liking' does not require an account, or at least I don't seek one. His distancing move, however, is deemed accountable by me as demonstrated through my question 'why do you not watch them' (line 692) to which Josh produces a confident age-based account 'Cos I'm a big boy now' (line 693). I provide a minimal response to his account in the form of an acknowledgement token 'oh' (line 694) at which point Josh elaborates on his

account. Here, he produces an extreme formulation through 'only babies watch them', followed by an immediate re-affirmation that he likes them, followed finally by a downgraded distancing with his 'I don't really watch them' (line 695). 'Liking' is again sandwiched between 'watching', but this time the distancing work achieved through the age-based elaboration 'only babies' is compromised by the less solid footing of not 'really' watching them. His 'don't really watch them' opens up the possibilities of a 'maybe sometimes' scenario and this plays out as I invite Millie to participate in the ongoing sequence.

Millie is hesitant to affirm that she likes Teletubbies but she replies positively to my question (line 697 and 698). Hesitations are not usually associated with the provision of a preferred response and her hesitation here demonstrates the considered nature of that response. Having received the preferred response I don't ask for an account of it, instead picking up on Josh's distinction between liking and watching and asking Millie if she watches it 'sometimes'? Again Millie provides a non-accountable preferred response. Both her responses are produced in whispered tones as were many of her contributions across the course of the focus group interaction. Claire contributes to the assessment sequence invoking a 'me too' strategy and thus building an alliance with Millie. She engages in format tying[8] with a reiteration of my 'sometimes' and thus does not overplay her connection to the potentially sensitive topic that is 'Teletubbies'. Millie and Claire, having both provided a 'preferred' response, receive a positive 'response cry' (Goodwin, 2006, p.182) through my 'great' utterance (line 703), which is delivered through hushed tones and serves to close down the sequence. This stands in contrast to the ambiguous 'oh' acknowledgement token provided to Josh earlier.

Discussion

The work of product evaluation in the focus group setting is shown here to involve a number of social complexities. Firstly, the types of responses provided must fit in with conversational conventions. Preferred responses can close down sequences, while dispreffered responses rarely do as they require accounts. Secondly, the accounting device provides the participant with the opportunity to construct a consumer self within this socio-cultural context. Thirdly, stated evaluations and accompanying accounts invite other participants to support or challenge members utterances thereby creating opportunities to build allegiances or foster disputes.

Josh's age-based account for why he does not watch 'Teletubbies' is illustrative of the fact that preschool consumers categorise the artefacts of consumer culture in terms of age (in)appropriateness. In distancing himself from the 'Teletubbies' programme, he uses/produces an 'age-based' repertoire that weaves through the consumer culture discourse produced by the focus group members and me, the moderator. Josh, thus accomplishes an 'aged' consumer self through talk-in-interaction. He is not explicit in mentioning his age in years but he contrasts his persona, 'a big boy' who likes but *does not* watch 'Teletubbies', with that of a 'baby' persona ,who likes, and as implied by Josh also watches Teletubbies. His initial assessment is met with very limited support from me, and silence from the other members of the focus group, with the exception of Cian who produces spontaneous parallel and separate preferences related to other consumer artefacts 'Care Bears' and 'Scooby Doo' (lines 696 and 704). This lack of support might explain Josh's subsequent downgrading from 'don't watch' to 'don't really watch' across just two turns (line 695).

Josh's very clear distinction between liking and watching potentially allows other members namely Millie and Claire, to position themselves, like him as 'liking' but not 'watching' Teletubbies, without compromising their status as 'big girls' and 'not babies'. However, they do not ratify his account, instead affirming that they 'watch it sometimes'. While this might see them positioned in Josh's 'only babies watch it' category, his preceding downgraded claim, to 'not really' watching it as opposed to 'never'

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[8] Goodwin (2006:11) defines Format Tying as constituting a publicly available (rather than hidden internal) *apparatus* for tying talk in one turn to another. By maintaining the shape of the prior utterance, the new elements of the utterance are rendered salient; they stand out in opposition to the prior move's components because the rest of the utterance remains the same.

watching it himself, muddies the waters with regard to exactly what level of liking and watching is socially acceptable. What is more noteworthy here, however, is the interaction taking place between Millie and Claire. Goodwin (2006: 195) argues in the context of assessment sequences that one way of 'constituting and displaying alliances is through affirming similar perspectives with respect to an event'. Claire is active in supporting Millie's claims in respect to liking and watching 'Teletubbies' as demonstrated in her spontaneous use of a 'me too' strategy.

By the end of the sequence, Josh has successfully utilised an age-based account in his evaluation of 'Teletubbies'. No member of the group has explicitly challenged his account and he has, thus, firmly asserted a 'big boy' consumer self in opposition to that of a baby. To this end, he has successfully utilised this material resource to make sense of his own place on the chronological ladder. Claire and Millie have used the opportunity to reinforce their own alliance. Meanings around 'Teletubbies' however, specifically the age at which it is acceptable to like and or watch it remain unresolved, and thus its social currency as an age-defining product is somewhat in flux.

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to reiterate that the methodological perspective employed here is not concerned with seeking the truth or ascribing 'true' inner states to individuals but rather argues that truths are constructed in the here and now of interaction, fluid in structure and serve differing functions across contexts. This paper conceptualises 'Age' as something that is made sense of for and by children through their utilisation of toys, media, consumables and other commercial artefacts. The 'choosing child' is addressed in empirical terms to reveal the social significance of 'doing' consumption related evaluations in the focus group setting. One closely transcribed assessment sequence was selected to illustrate how children might utilise the production of consumption evaluations for social ends in the context of a focus group setting. 'Teletubbies' provided the 'stuff' of consumer culture as Josh engaged in 'a cultural routine' (Corsaro, 2005) in which he attempted to make sense of himself as 'aged' in relation to this commercial artefact. The CA-informed discourse analytical perspective allowed a focus to be gained on the 'how' of this activity. The CA lens shed light on how 'doing age' is shaped and patterned (examination of preference structure organisation and the accounting mechanism). The DA lens shed light on the form and substance of social accomplishments (identification of age-based repertoire). A close examination of the interaction between participants also revealed that shared evaluations are used to build alliances between members. Josh introduced the experiential dimension of 'watching' as distinct from 'liking' in his assessment of this particular icon of children's consumer culture. His logic suggests that liking something that is age inappropriate is acceptable but watching it is not thus illustrating the complexities involved in 'doing consumption evaluations' by children as young as three and four years of age in the focus group setting.

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APPENDIX A

Transcription Conventions

The glossary of symbols provided below has been adapted from those provided by Psathas (1995) and Ten Have (1999). The majority of these symbols were first developed by Gail Jefferson.

	Symbol	Meaning
I - Sequencing	[	A *single left bracket* indicates the point of overlap onset.
	]	A *single right bracket* indicates the point of at which overlapping stops.
	=	*Equal signs* indicate *latching* that is there is no interval between the end of a prior and the start of a next part of talk.
II – Timed Intervals	(0.0)	The *number in parentheses* indicates the elapsed time in tenths of seconds of a pause in speech.
	(.)	A *dot in parentheses* indicates a very brief pause within or between utterances.
	Word	*Underscoring* indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude.
III – Characteristics of Speech Production	:::	*Colons* indicate a prolongation of the immediately prior sound. Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound.
	-	A *dash* indicates a cut-off of the prior word or sound.
	. , ? ?, !	*Punctuation marks* are used to indicate characteristics of speech production; they do not refer to grammatical units.
	.	A *period* indicates a stopping fall in tone.
	,	A *comma* indicates a continuing intonation, the kind of falling-rising contour produced when reading items from a list.
	?	A *question mark* indicates a rising intonation.
	!	An *exclamation point* indicates an animated tone.
	↓↑	*Arrows* indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterance-part immediately following the arrow.
	WORD	*Upper case* indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
	°word °	Utterances or utterance parts bracketed by *degree signs* are relatively quieter than the surrounding talk.
	>text<	*Right/left carets* bracketing an utterance indicate the enclosed speech was delivered more rapidly than usual for the speaker.
	<text>	*Left/right carets* bracketing an utterance indicate the enclosed speech was delivered more slowly than usual for the speaker.
	.hhhh	A *dot-prefixed row of hs* indicates an inbreath. Without the dot they indicate an outbreath.
	W(h)ord	A *parenthesised h, or row of hs within a word* indicates breathiness, as in laughter, crying, etc.
IV - Transcribers Doubts & Comments	( )	*Empty parentheses* indicates the transcribers inability to hear what was said and/or to identify the speaker.
	(word)	*Parenthesized words* indicates dubious hearings or speaker identifications.
	(( ))	*Double parentheses* contain transcriber's descriptions rather than, or in addition to, transcriptions.
	→	*Left margin arrows* indicate specific parts of an extract discussed in the text.