

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

Confronted with 111 distinct identity collages and accompanying reflective commentaries, it is feasible that the theoretical foundations underpinning this research may be overlooked. In these works a great diversity of images, texts and styles creatively articulated the varying attitudes, interests and concerns of young people from different backgrounds. However, this study initially opened with a discussion of media representation – specifically focusing on ethnic minority groups – progressing on to an exploration of audience research paradigms, and examined the validity of creative and visual methods within social research. This concluding chapter will consider the possible contributions of this research project in relation to these fields, and the credibility of its methodology as discussed in Chapter 5. Furthermore, it will aim to develop broader conclusions based on the interview analyses undertaken within Chapters 6 and 7 to assess young people’s relationship with media and how it is utilised in the construction and conceptualisation of their identities. The findings are grouped into two categories: ‘Identities and Audiences’ and ‘Method’.

### **8.1 Identities and Audiences**

The following findings are based on the responses of the 111 young people engaged in this study. Despite these participants not constituting a scientifically constructed representative sample, their conceptualisations of identity have been examined in sufficient detail for us to be confident about the reliability of these points. Whilst the themes which emerge could be explored further in future research, this study was specific to these young people living in a particular time and within certain locations. Therefore although presenting suggestive evidence, this study does not make generalising claims.

#### **8.1.1 Understanding Identity**

The current study found, in agreement with David Gauntlett’s (2007) Lego identity study, that the concept of identity was readily accepted by all participants, as was the

ability to represent a sense of self in multiple ways using different media, for instance through identity collages. Despite this, some individuals initially articulated concerns regarding *how* they could portray their identity in such a manner, expressing uncertainties over what to represent and which images to employ. Nevertheless, a fundamental finding is that participants *understood* the exercise, assuming they possessed an identity that could be depicted in various creative ways. Thus, participants' capacity to consider and convey their identities provides support for positions which claim individuals in late modern Western societies conceptualise self-identity as an ongoing project that is constructed and continually revised, as Anthony Giddens (1991), Ulrich Beck (1992), John Thompson (1995) and Gauntlett (2002) argued (outlined in Chapters 6 and 7). Therefore, rather than being a theoretical abstraction contained within academic discourse, identity is a phenomenon entrenched within people's everyday practices and lives. Moreover, the fact that these participants from varying backgrounds were able to engage with the collage-making exercise with comparative ease further appears to validate Thompson's (1995) argument which maintained individuals actively create a meaningful sense of self by appropriating and incorporating symbolic materials into a coherent narrative of self-identity. Hence, participants were able to represent their sense of self through the collages as it involved them in a process that was analogous to their strategies of identity construction.

### **8.1.2 Gendered Identities**

Looking at specific aspects of identity, we saw in Chapter 6, that gender was central to participants' conceptualisations of their identities. Although the participants appeared to construct a sense of self in accordance with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, on closer reading their comments demonstrated that they did not wholly conform to these gendered positionings. For the boys, and in agreement with previous research (Connell, 2000; O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002), ideals associated with hegemonic masculinity within modern Western societies such as toughness, power and competitiveness, featured as prevalent themes throughout their accounts. These ideas were primarily articulated through the boys' assertions of heterosexuality and sport, the latter

particularly serving to signify their perceptions that they possessed active masculine attributes including prowess and courage. Such hegemonic conceptions of masculinity were further enforced by these participants utilising a procedure David Buckingham (1993c) identified as 'policing', in which boys are required to not only monitor their own behaviour but also the actions of others. In this study two policing strategies were clearly evident, each of which was employed to have a decided effect: firstly, when discussing girls within a sexual context the boys adopted humour as an evasive technique for deflecting feelings of embarrassment and discomfort, as well as halting conversations to avoid placing themselves 'at risk' of ridicule by peers; secondly, homophobia was invoked to marginalise boys that were seen as not complying with hegemonic masculine ideals, a finding revealed by two participants who remarked other people perceived them as 'gay'. Furthermore, whilst a small minority of boys did portray supposed 'feminine' traits on their identity collages, for example 'cute' and 'loving', in discussions these participants either rejected such qualities outright or countered them with an affirmation of hegemonic masculine values. Therefore, the ongoing process of policing masculinity exhibited by the boys indicates that their masculine identities are, to use Buckingham's words, 'achieved rather than given' (p. 97) and constituted a *performance* which was enacted for themselves as well as others, most overtly displayed by one participant who over-emphasised heterosexuality to disguise expressing insecurities regarding his own sense of self-identity (Chapter 6, pp. 112-113).

Despite the dominance of hegemonic masculine ideals apparent in boys' formulations of their identities it should be noted that a range of *masculinities* emerged within these discussions, similar to previous studies' findings (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002). For instance, sport was utilised by middle-class boys to construct a gendered identity grounded in the ethos of competitiveness, whereas working-class boys conceptualised a masculinity based upon empowerment gained through self-actualisation; for example, this was demonstrated by one participant who used boxing as a strategy for channelling frustrations and anxieties in a positive context (Chapter 6, p. 122). Moreover, two boys actively subverted hegemonic masculine ideals by discarding pejorative usages of the words 'gay' and 'geek', and in doing so made manifest alternative conceptions of masculinity. In addition, arenas which initially appeared to facilitate the assertion of hegemonic values worked in

more ambivalent ways: sport did not merely operate as a resource which enabled notions of active masculinity to be communicated, but also functioned as a metaphorical defence for hegemonic *and* alternative masculinities; an emphasis on heterosexuality served to affirm the boys' attainment of hegemonic masculine attributes, however these same assertions were made *ironically* in some cases to deliberately parody, whilst simultaneously problematising, conventional notions of masculinity – although this play was limited within a heterosexual discourse. Thus, the boys' identity collages and discussions highlighted that they did not completely adhere to conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, nor as a result did they show signs of experiencing a 'crisis of masculinity'. Instead, these participants demonstrated that they were capable of expressing their contradictory characteristics – albeit visually – and were able to maintain conflicting attitudes which exposed the ambiguous nature of masculinity itself. Consequently, the boys' conceptualisations of their identities may indicate that traditional notions of masculinity are gradually becoming destabilised; nonetheless, conventional masculinity is still utilised as a point of reference from which they can accept or reject principles in order to negotiate their own conceptions of masculinity. Therefore, as a greater proliferation of masculinities begin to emerge and establish themselves as a significant presence, it seems likely that traditional masculinity will eventually become somewhat outmoded and less useful for boys in contemporary society.

Similar to the boys, the girls' accounts appeared to demonstrate that they conceptualised their identities in terms of conventional gender roles and attributes. For example, many of the girls employed images such as love hearts and angels to metaphorically represent their femininity and emphasised traits including cute, kind, caring and supportive to stress they possessed 'feminine' qualities. Thus, these participants seemed to indicate that traditional notions of femininity were intrinsic to their understandings of their identities. Nevertheless, despite ostensibly conforming with orthodox gender ideals, the girls' discussions revealed that these conceptions were more ambiguous and complex; as some participants illustrated their 'feminine' properties using pictures of men, whilst other girls adopted an ironic and knowing mode of address within their work which enabled them to engage playfully with conventional femininity – a strategy promoted by teenage girls' magazines, as identified by Angela McRobbie (1999). Furthermore, within the identity collages the

girls utilised a broad range of visuals to articulate differing aspects of their identities, yet some participants were hesitant about discussing and elaborating upon any elements which deviated from traditional feminine standards. As such, these moments of self-censorship may reflect the girls' acceptance of patriarchal discourse which expects them to adhere to established gender norms. However, the inclusion of contrary images within the girls' identity collages seems to suggest that they recognised conflicting characteristics as *equally* valid aspects of their (feminine) identities and wanted to communicate this. Therefore the tension which arises between the girls' conceptions of their identities and traditional notions of the 'feminine' highlights that conventional femininity is not an inherent quality of their selves; rather femininity is constructed as a performance which the girls can employ for their own purposes within everyday life, supporting findings noted previously by both Beverley Skeggs (1997) and Gauntlett (2002).

In light of the undetermined nature of femininity the girls within this study aimed to articulate their *own* identities through consumption, specifically fashion. For these participants being perceived as having a fashionable persona was a strategy through which they sought to convey their own sense of autonomy to others, a position inevitably influenced by the success of 'girl power' rhetoric. Nevertheless, as various commentators have argued (e.g. Whelehan, 2000; McRobbie, 2001; Harris, 2004a), the girl power approach raises wider concerns as it may constrict girls' political effectivity by leading them to believe that empowerment and success can only be achieved through acts of consumption and physical attractiveness. Indeed, this idea was apparent in some girls' accounts for whom a lack of fashionable status and anxieties about beauty appeared to be equated with their own feelings of powerlessness. It should be noted however, that whilst bodily anxieties and concerns about fashion remained recurring themes throughout participants' discussions, *at the same time* the girls asserted notions of confidence and independence promoted by girl power regarding their sense of self even in instances when they felt these qualities were not a facet of themselves. Therefore, the display of confidence and independence which were central to many girls' conceptions of identity suggests that the performative character of femininity enabled them to not only enact traditional ideas of the 'feminine', but challenge these same principles by undermining feminine conventions. Moreover, for participants girl power discourse did not exercise

complete control over the manner in which they conceptualised themselves, rather these girls were able to *actively* negotiate a number of (sometimes competing) discourses simultaneously to inform their identity construction – as demonstrated by some Muslim girls. Consequently the girls revealed that their relationship with femininity was deeply intricate as they both invested in notions of conventional femininity whilst concurrently affirming girl power principles. Importantly, this engagement with girl power did not, as suggested by previous studies (Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a; McRobbie, 2004; Taft, 2004), serve to depoliticise and silence these young women, instead it appeared to provide them with a vehicle to explore and voice their identities, as well as enabling them to recognise gender inequalities and contest sexist discourse. Thus, the girls demonstrated that they were not passive and/or politically naïve, and may indicate that whilst femininity remains an ambiguous concept feminist values have become, for girls living in late modern Western societies, in certain ways fundamental to how they conceptualise their identities.

### **8.1.3 Unique Identities**

As noted above, the participants' discussions demonstrated that notions of gender were integral to their conceptions of identities; however, these were accompanied by forceful assertions of 'individualism' by both boys and girls which seemed to transgress any gender differences, as outlined in Chapter 6. These articulations of individuality were most frequently conveyed by the participants expressing originality and uniqueness as well as emphasising autonomy through highlighting assertiveness – principally employing concepts of 'loudness' and 'freedom' – to signify they had an independent character and 'voice'. Furthermore, for some participants their individualism and self-made status was paradoxically constructed through the appropriation and consumption of commercial products (as Miles, 2000, has observed), nevertheless this did not preclude the fact that they could utilise these items creatively to communicate a sense of individuality. Thus, individualism was equated by the participants with an empowering agency, through which they believed a successful self could be achieved; lending support to the argument that, in late modern Western societies, youth are now *compelled* to gain such success through the establishment of a unique identity of their own making and encouraged to exhibit their

choices and projects of the self for examination by other people, as argued by Anita Harris (2004a). Indeed, this point was clearly evidenced within some participants' discussions of involvement in artistic activities, whereby creative processes metaphorically represented their own productions of the self, and such engagement illustrated a desire to create as well as display conceptions of a unique self-made identity: claims that can be made of the identity collages themselves. Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming number of articulations about possessing unique, self-made identities it is worth noting that a minority of participants – all of whom were from deprived areas or ethnic minority individuals living within predominantly white environments – elected instead to foreground their 'normal' status, possibly as a strategy for negating their liminal positioning. Therefore these participants indicated an (un)knowing awareness that opportunities for attaining autonomy and empowerment proposed by the ethos of individualism are not equally available to all. Consequently discussions about 'individuality' and 'normalness' revealed that both boys and girls actively considered their identities in a self-aware manner, underlying the centrality of reflexivity within these young people's lives, and further implied issues pertaining to individualism played as significant a role as notions of gender in the participants' conceptualisations of their identities. Thus, the participants' identity collages and discussions suggested that no single facet of their identities took precedence over another, rather these elements *collectively* constituted their conceptions of self – a point which is developed in the following section.

#### **8.1.4 Ethnic Identities**

In consideration of previous work on ethnic minority representation which argued that mainstream media portrayals had a negative impact on minority groups (see Chapter 2), the role of ethnicity in shaping participants' conceptions of identity may have been expected to surface as a prominent theme within the identity collages and discussions. However, this was – maybe somewhat surprisingly – not the case, yet simultaneously revealed intricate and nuanced insights into these children's understandings of ethnic identities. Indeed, a significant finding demonstrated within this study is that ethnicity *did not* appear to be a key structural influence on ethnic minority participants' constructions of their identities, in contrast to results proposed by earlier

research projects (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002). For instance, comments by some black participants from ethnically diverse environments illustrated that whilst black identification was a factor of their relationships with sports and media figures, this did not constitute the sole motive for these associations. Therefore, these participants' discussions highlighted that although 'blackness' remained a fundamental aspect of their identities, being black was not conceptualised of as a totalising identity signalling, as Hall (1989) has stated, the 'end of the essential black subject' (p. 443). Accordingly, by not situating their sense of self within a unitary (black) identity these individuals' articulations foregrounded that they conceived their identities as complex and diverse – such diversity also being an inherent feature of their day-to-day experiences and multicultural worlds. Nevertheless, within ethnic minority participants' responses an important dichotomy emerged between their accounts: for those participants living in multicultural areas ethnicity was perceived as *one* element of their self-identity; conversely, children who resided within a predominantly white environment elevated their ethnic identity to a primary position as what seemed to be a consequence of their immediate locale, believing skin colour difference was responsible for other (white) people's negative perceptions of themselves. Hence, these young people utilised specifically selected black media personalities who they viewed as positive figures not only as a source of black identification – as ethnic minority participants in multicultural settings did – but *also* to counter stereotypes, negate outsider status and assert their ethnic heritage. In this context then, such strategies appeared necessary for these participants in exclusively white locales as a means of challenging what they considered limited and negative representations of 'blackness' which, it emerged through discussions, were regarded as being principally propagated via mass media representations of 'blackness': representations that came to be seen as influencing the white majority's (mis)understandings of black individuals (as outlined in a number of studies discussed in Chapter 2).

The above concerns raised about black representation were made manifest within some white participants' responses; however, further differences arose between how young people from predominantly white areas and those living in multicultural environments conceptualised 'blackness'. For example, when discussing black R&B musicians as negative role models one participant from a white locale unintentionally

equated their negative perceptions of these artists with black people collectively, a position which appeared to be informed and directed by representations of ‘blackness’ circulated through mass media discourses – a finding reflected and argued in Karen Ross’ (1992) work on white perceptions of ethnic minorities on television (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, this argument importantly neglects the possibility that such (mis)understandings may actually result from a limited experience of ethnic diversity within this social context, rather than being an effect of the media representations themselves. Indeed this point is arguably supported when taking into account that some white children from multicultural areas *deliberately* employed images of black rap stars to illustrate that they were perceived by others in a negative light, whilst simultaneously acknowledging such media portrayals were not necessarily intrinsically derogatory and reductive. By doing so, these participants seemed to demonstrate an awareness of stereotyping and the ability to use such representations in an ironic manner, which highlighted their refusal to conform with negative notions about ‘blackness’ unproblematically. Therefore these discussions indicated that the participants’ perceptions of ethnic minority representations were determined, to some degree, by their social worlds: with diversity intrinsic to multicultural milieus facilitating participants’ negotiations of media representations alongside their *actual* understandings of ethnic minority individuals and cultural products encountered daily in these environments; and a lack of diversity within the almost exclusively white area producing and perpetuating stereotyped notions of ethnicity, resulting in ethnic minority participants in this locale feeling isolated, labelled as different as well as subject to racism, thus heightening these young people’s associations with their ethnic identities.

Despite the broader understandings of ethnic identities and their representations fostered by diversity within multicultural areas, importantly this does not suggest that racism was precluded from such environments. This was clearly apparent in one white male participant’s responses who articulated overtly racist comments about a fellow pupil of Indian descent, but maintained these remarks were merely, to use Stephen Frosh, Anne Phoenix and Rob Pattman’s (2002) words, ‘jokey cussing’ (p. 171) in an attempt to disavow and distance himself from any accusations of offence – the same strategy also employed by white participants within Les Back’s (1991, 1996) previous research on South London adolescents and Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman’s

(2002) study of young men in contemporary society. Furthermore, assertions of racism by some white participants in this study appeared to emerge in two distinct forms: Asian participants being subject to a ‘cultural racism’ grounded within notions of cultural difference (Modood, 1992, 1997, 2005); whilst black participants were subject to prejudice based upon skin colour and physical difference (Hall, 1997), with black boys specifically being racialised as the embodiment of a ‘super-masculinity’ and labelled as ‘sexy’ and ‘cool’ (Majors and Billinson, 1992; Back, 1994; Sewell, 1997). Moreover, this situation was compounded when noting that only white participants within the study specifically utilised images of St George’s Crosses, Union Jacks and United Kingdom maps on their identity collages to affirm a sense of Englishness<sup>69</sup>, which may indicate they conflated notions of Englishness with whiteness, thus implying, as Modood (2001) has argued, that ‘English has been treated by the new Britons as a closed ethnicity rather than an open nationality’<sup>70</sup>. This point was supported by some white participants who elected to identify themselves as British, emphasising its more inclusive character, although these remarks continued to carry connotations of a unified *white* nation.<sup>71</sup> Hence, these factors may explain why the majority of ethnic minority participants within interviews described themselves *solely* in terms of their ethnic heritage<sup>72</sup>, or for some Muslims

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<sup>69</sup> Although one British-Pakistani participant included an image of the UK map on their identity collage (Appendix A.2.2), this was not employed to assert ‘Englishness’, but instead to express that they were born in England; however, this participant also emphasised England was ‘my country’ which may further indicate their defiance against racist nationalist discourses that deny ethnic minority inclusion. Similarly, two dual heritage children used the Union Jack/George Cross to express part of their heritage (Appendix A.5.13; A.6.1), nevertheless, as the British-Pakistani participant, these individuals utilised these images to signify they were ‘born here’.

<sup>70</sup> This concept was also demonstrated within an ethnic minority participant’s account, in which they illustrated the power of this racist discourse by communicating an unknowing internalisation of these ideals (see Chapter 7, p. 215).

<sup>71</sup> This point is demonstrated by the following extract:

Interviewer: Why would you say British and not English?  
Christina T1: Because like Great Britain is like the whole country and I see myself as part of the community, and English is like just one bit and it’s like kind of like separated, if you say Britain it’s kind of joined so like more people *like me* are in Scotland, Wales and stuff and like Great Britain is like one country, it’s not divided.

<sup>72</sup> Whilst some ethnic minority participants described themselves using hyphenated terms such as British-Asian, this was to express the fact that they were born in England with

their religion – in contrast to what was presented in their identity collages – either as a means of asserting their (trans)ethnic identity to politically challenge racist discourses and/or because they felt alienated and excluded from using English/British as an identity they can claim for themselves due to racism. Despite this, ethnic minority children's identity collages and discussions *did* demonstrate that these participants conceptualised ethnicity as constituting *one* fundamental element of their self-identity which were negotiated alongside other aspects of their selves which were seen as equally significant.

### 8.1.5 Role Models and Self-Identity

The role of contemporary media within late modern Western societies as a resource from which individuals can conceptualise and construct identities was discussed in Chapter 7, where it was suggested that people appropriate 'symbolic materials' provided by the media reflexively into their narratives of self-formation (Thompson, 1995). Within the study this concept became apparent through participants' utilisation of media figures as 'role models' in their conceptions of self. However the term role models, as Gauntlett (2002) noted, is freely employed within public discourse despite a lack of consensus regarding what this phrase actually means or how role models might impact on individuals' attitudes and identities, with current understandings limited to social learning theory which – put simply – asserts that people learn behaviour through observation. Nevertheless, useful definitions of role models were traced in the work of John Jung (1986) and Kristin Anderson and Donna Cavallaro (2002) who proposed that 'role models are important not because they teach observers how to behave but because they *inspire* observers to want to learn to behave in certain ways or to assume certain roles' (Jung, 1986, p. 533, my emphasis). As such these figures not only provide a 'learning function' (Jung, 1986, p. 526) but individuals 'may see *possibilities* in that person' (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002, p. 161, original emphasis).

At a fundamental level these ideas were demonstrated within the participants' discussions in which they expressed notions about identification, aspiration and

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'British' appearing to be used simply to indicate their legal status (a similar finding demonstrated in previous research: see Modood *et al.*, 1994).

inspiration as integral elements of their associations with role models. Importantly, though, the participants' accounts further revealed that they adopted *specific* traits of role models as a means to articulate their self-identity rather than accepting these figures as a whole, supporting findings by Rachel Bromnick and Brian Swallow (1999) that argued young people may admire a famous individual whilst not strictly identifying with them. For instance the concept of integrity was a prominent theme raised within many participants' responses about their role models, and highlighted that this attribute was a value they identified with: implying that this virtue itself – instead of the celebrity – was intrinsic to these participants' relationships with their role models and indicating that they possessed or aimed to attain this ideal, similar sentiments underlying discussions centred upon the issue of authenticity. Significantly, in these conversations participants' comments foregrounded that they not only selected and identified with media figures who were seen as embodying the quality of authentic expression, but also employed the role models' authenticity as a vehicle through which their own personal values and experiences could be communicated and validated, as well as a strategy for exploring external realities. Therefore, role models enabled these participants to consider their own identities and social worlds by acting as a tool for self-reflection; however, this was dependent upon the participants understanding their role model as 'normal', that is someone who shared a familiar reality on an experiential level. Thus, for these participants, role models operated as a cultural resource from which they could conceptualise, construct and convey diverse aspects of their identities, with diversity also coming to be regarded as a key constituent of the role models themselves. Nevertheless, these participants did not always view the diverse elements of their selves as functioning harmoniously with one another but acknowledged that diversity could at times give rise to conflict, made evident within discussions which highlighted an awareness of ambivalence in role models – and by association their own identities – manifested through the 'good/bad' dichotomy. Consequently by negotiating the 'good/bad' dichotomy in role models, these young people were afforded a method that provided them with a means to mediate ambivalence they perceived within their selves as well as their social worlds. Moreover, in identifying ambivalence within role models participants demonstrated they recognised both positive and negative aspects of these figures and were able to actively discriminate between such qualities, problematising claims which suggest that children are passive and susceptible to role models'

influence, and may further reinforce the suggestion that this contradiction is a typical characteristic of the human condition.

In light of the above, it seems likely that role models did not exclusively perform a positive or negative function, or operate as figures individuals sought to imitate directly; rather role models acted as a 'tool kit' which enabled participants to utilise specific facets of these figures within the formations of their self-identities (as argued previously by Gauntlett, 2002 and Fritzsche, 2004). Thus, by thinking about their selves in relation to role models these figures facilitated participants' constructions of their own models for living and served as, to use Gauntlett's (2002) words, '*navigation points* as individuals steer their own personal routes through life' (p. 250, original emphasis); although it should be noted that family, friends and other people encountered within daily life probably continue to play a more crucial role in shaping individuals' identities. Indeed this latter factor may account for why Asian participants did not make reference to role models in their identity collages and interviews. Whilst this could be attributed to an under-representation of Asian figures within the media, as these discussions have demonstrated, these individuals identified with *values* not celebrities *per se*; therefore it is feasible that family, cultural and religious values exerted a greater significance on their conceptions of self<sup>73</sup> – as was highlighted by some Muslim girls' comments in Chapter 6 which emphasised the centrality of religion in their identities. Hence, these discussions extend considerations of role models beyond the confines of ethnicity and gender; and perhaps begin to develop understandings of the *processes* through which role models function.

### 8.1.6 The Complexity of Audiences

In Chapter 3 we saw that although audiences are recognised in existing literature as diverse – consisting of disparate individuals from different social and cultural

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<sup>73</sup> It should be emphasised that within this study a number of Asian publications were provided to the participants from which images of Asian celebrities could have been selected had they wished to (for a full list of magazines and newspapers supplied see Chapter 5). Furthermore, these participants lived in multicultural environments where a great abundance of cultural media products were available to them, but despite this they did not mention these or name any Asian role models when offered the opportunity to do so within the interviews.

backgrounds with varying interests (Moore, 1993) – much research continues to discuss ‘audiences’ generically appearing to suggest this is acceptable as long as the concept of diversity has been acknowledged. Furthermore as Gauntlett (2004) noted, previous studies have conceptualised people as an ‘audience’ in terms of their relationship with particular texts, forms or genres, disregarding that within everyday life individuals are saturated by and consume multiple media products. Therefore, in order to develop more considered understandings of the role of media within peoples’ lives research must embrace, as Martin Barker (1998) argued, the ‘study of the *actual* audience in lived experience’ (p. 190, original emphasis) as work by, for example, David Morley (1986), Janice Radway (1987) and James Lull (1990) discussed in Chapter 3 demonstrated. Nevertheless, despite accounting for the social context and issues in which media are used, such studies neglect – to return to Gauntlett’s (2004) point above – that individuals do not encounter single texts in isolation, but as one element amongst a wide range of media within their day-to-day existence. Consequently, research must engage with the social context and issues relating to people’s media use, *and* understood in relation to the fact that individuals consume numerous as well as varied media rather than one solitary product. By doing so, it not only becomes apparent that audiences consist of diverse individuals but each individual within themselves is complex, contradictory and diverse – a notion that this study has attempted to address.

## **8.2 Method**

An underlying theme central to this study has been about the potential benefits of creative and visual methods within social research. The following findings expand upon results produced by previous studies outlined in Chapter 4, and specifically this research project, as detailed in Chapters 5 to 7.

### **8.2.1 Reflection and Creativity**

As noted in Chapter 4, creative and visual methods afford participants *reflective time* to consider their thoughts and feelings *before* producing a response: which can importantly help engender more insightful and nuanced research results.

Significantly, this does not imply that individuals are incapable of generating immediate feedback to researchers' enquiries; rather these answers may not provide an entirely authentic or fully valid representation of people's more exact attitudes and emotions. As we saw in Chapter 4, David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green's (1994) work on pedagogic practices within media studies demonstrated that the combined process of creative production *and* reflection facilitated a more in depth understanding of children's media literacy by allowing young people *time* to evaluate their own conceptions, enabling them to construct meaningful responses. Therefore, by engaging participants in creative tasks for a set duration, creative and visual research methods grant individuals time to gestate their ideas and formulate an indirect response instead of being compelled to develop an instant answer to direct questions using words. Indeed this inextricable link between creative processes and reflection was illustrated by one participant, quoted in Chapter 6, who said 'I can customise and think about things and can create new stuff' (p. 169).

Furthermore, as we are unable to form an immediate understanding of other people's identities, this must be achieved through interpreting materials they produce – such as talk, clothing and personal objects – over an extended period. Importantly, creative and visual research methods can function as a 'short-cut' in this procedure by purposefully inviting individuals to create an artefact as a particular element of the research exercise. To interpret these non-linguistic products participants are requested to supply their *own* interpretations of their work using language; however, language is only reintroduced *following* time engaged in the non-verbal reflective process of making items that convey frequently intricate arrangements of thoughts and feelings, and thus this approach accommodates a more holistic appreciation of issues which concern the participants.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5 this study would have ideally liked to, and benefited from, granting participants access to *any* images of their own choosing within the construction of their identity collages to enable freedom of expression facilitated through, for example, the use of internet and colour printing facilities. However, this was not possible due to time and financial restraints as well as most schools simply lacking the adequate resources to cater for such a request. Despite this, these limitations did not seem to have a significant impact on this study; nevertheless future research projects should consider such issues and endeavour to broaden the scope of materials available to participants, which would afford individuals greater opportunity to determine their own forms of self-expression, as well as producing more rich and fruitful information for analysis.

## 8.2.2 The Value of Metaphor

Within social research concepts such as identity, audiences and representation frequently form the focus of study, however as these phenomena are *abstract* concepts researchers become confronted with the difficulty of determining how to acquire information on these matters: often resorting to methods that depend upon individuals formulating and articulating their ideas in words which may prove demanding for participants, as empirical studies mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated. Metaphors can therefore provide a powerful alternative to the strictures imposed by formal language; as both Horst Niesyto (2000) and Brandon Williams (2002) suggested, outlined in Chapter 4, metaphors offer participants a strategy through which thoughts and feelings can be communicated that they may struggle to put into words, and facilitate freer and associative forms of ‘open expression’ (Williams, 2002, p. 55).

This study exploited and developed the value of metaphors in social research by directing participants to create a metaphorical collage on how they conceptualised their identities. In these works constituent elements of the collages functioned as metaphors to represent aspects of participants’ identities, but the completed pictures operated as a metaphor on another plane through revealing contradictions, relationships and patterns within the *whole* image. This was made possible as the task itself required participants to produce an entire visual representation of their identity ‘all in one go’ (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 183), with individuals’ reflections on their collages exploring each image independently whilst moving towards an explanation of what was shown by the overall piece. Consequently, viewing the collage enabled participants to consider their whole presentation of identity in relation to their responses to the constituent parts; the metaphors providing participants with an opportunity to express and share creative interpretations of their personal and social worlds.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> The above discussions suggest considerable scope for future research based both on the information collated over the duration of this study and in terms of potential new research conducted using creative and visual methods. For example, the identity collages produced and accompanying reflective commentaries offered a rich and abundant source of material on children’s conceptions of their identities for analysis and, of course, young people’s attitudes to any other issue could also be effectively explored in a similar fashion. Furthermore, the

### 8.3 In Conclusion

The notion of identity has been fundamental to this study, but this concept remains ambiguous, abstract and difficult to define. Consequently, within academic thinking identity has at times lapsed into being conceptualised in terms of broad categorisations such as gender, class and ethnicity. In contrast, this study aimed to explore the issue of identity through identifying how it was understood by young people *themselves*; and was struck by the relative clarity with which children from diverse backgrounds were capable of imagining and communicating ideas about their own self-identity to other individuals. Furthermore, in producing a number of findings on young people's identities and how these may be examined, this study has specifically proposed a creative and visual research method which afforded participants reflective time to consider their identities by inviting them to construct a metaphorical representation of it in collage form. This process required participants to reflect upon their own identity whilst leafing through a variety of visual texts, thoughtfully rejecting and selecting images which, when brought together, expressed the diverse aspects of their selves as a unified whole. Moreover, the medium of collage itself was straightforward, requiring no serious artistic skill, which most participants enjoyed for this reason, and accordingly these young people could create an artwork that they were pleased with to varying degrees – although this approach could obviously utilise a variety of different creative materials and techniques.

The identity collages produced were often intricate as well as complex, and it became increasingly apparent that the process of cutting and pasting images came to metaphorically represent the act of constructing the ongoing project of the self and

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methodology employed in this study could be further refined by undertaking a statistical content analysis of the images utilised within these collages themselves: a method that this research project has not engaged with but may produce rewarding data given the 111 identity collages created, and facilitate a move towards a mixed method approach. In addition, the identity collage – or a number of identity collages – could be created by each individual over an extended period and within various contexts, such as school and home, to see if different 'voices' emerged (however this would obviously be dependent upon sufficient time and resources being made available). Moreover alongside the individual interviews, group discussions could be held in which children talk about their own work and that of others to establish whether different concerns are raised within a group environment. As such, information provided by these diverse methods would be a useful addition to existing material, although these strategies should importantly work together in a complementary manner, rather than any one element determining the research process and findings.

exhibiting this to the external world. It was also possible to see that the role of the media emerged as a resource individuals used to conceptualise and formulate their own current sense of self, and articulate aspirations for a future identity. As such, each individual was a biographer creating their own narrative of self-identity, telling unique stories about their own identities and social worlds, stories which have many chapters to come.