YOUNG PEOPLE AND BRITISH IDENTITY

Research Study Conducted for The Camelot Foundation by Ipsos MORI
The idea for this research grew from a seminar that The Foundation held on 13th July 2005, only two days after the tragedy of the London bombings, as we have read and seen in the media there was an immense sense of solidarity as we were united in our grief and shock – it lead to many questions about the sense of identity and Britishness at our seminar for the young people that attended. Our former Director, Susan Elizabeth, developed this research at the outset; her role in shaping this work was fundamental.

One of the many virtues of this work is that it has served as a reminder of some of the facts that face young people everyday and through commissioning Ipsos MORI we wanted to connect directly with the voice of those young people.

The Foundation considers itself unique through its combination of targeted grant giving and direct programme delivery. We aim to make a real difference to the lives of the most disadvantaged young people and show that they have a positive role to play in shaping their own futures and the future of their communities. When we review our grant making and programme delivery we do so with an unblinking focus on reaching the marginalised young people that The Foundation was set up to serve by Camelot Group plc in 1997. The commitment of our Trustees and sponsor allows us to strive for innovation and to tackle issues that will secure real change in policy and practice.

It is always a privilege to work directly with our young people and this report is a product of their support too – the photographs contained in the report are of young people that have been on the 4front journey; a development programme for young people that aims to develop skills, broaden thinking and encourage leadership. We are confident that this research will be the beginning of a new journey for The Foundation and inform our thinking and that of others for the future.

Samantha Hyde
Acting Director
This summary provides an overview of the key findings from the qualitative, quantitative and semiotic research. For more detail on any element of this summary please refer to the main report and for detailed evidence of the semiotic findings.
Young people's lives today

Being young involves crafting different facets of personal identity including tastes and preferences in music, sport, fashion, hobbies, humour, television, gaming, and the internet to name a few. Defining these attributes is a decisive pre-occupation for young people and determines social standing, group status and personal trajectory.

The research uncovers a fundamental lack of emotional resonance amongst young people with the concept of Britishness which is seen as a static attribute that cannot be changed or re-configured. The findings suggest strongly that current notions of Britishness go against the 'project of being young' and the state of flux that comes with adolescence.

Spontaneous associations with Britishness amongst young people include the Queen, tea and crumpets, and Big Ben etc, which are rather “old world” versions and do not reflect a contemporary Britain or social reality. For many young people Britain represents an old, hierarchical, traditional, political discourse that does not fit with the fresh, inventive, messy and often chaotic world of a teenager. Furthermore, many young people in this research do not know the geo-political story of Great Britain or the United Kingdom.

Britishness does not feature on the list of personal traits which helps define personal identity. This is because young people see British identity as a legal construct used only in official circumstances. Additionally, being Welsh, Scottish or Irish has far more emotional resonance than Britishness. Family connections are rated much more significant than a shared British identity. For instance, only a quarter of the 672 young people surveyed said Britishness was more important to them than their family's country of origin.

Whilst Britishness did not resonate strongly with everyday life, young people did not however consider it unimportant. Indeed, three quarters say a shared sense of Britishness is important to the country (77%). On a rational level they recognise a number of advantages to living in Britain, such as the strong economy and good public services like the NHS. They value British institutions like the BBC, good education and coveted universities, basic law and order and social rules and the knowledge that personal freedoms and human rights will be protected. They also point out that the four nations, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, working together particularly for economic stability, in times of national crisis and the armed forces is a good thing.

Being British also becomes relevant when abroad on holiday – a form of ‘othering’, where one’s national identity becomes stronger in the face of a culture that is not your own. Despite all this, being British does not seem to add anything to the daily narrative where one's national identity becomes stronger in the face of a culture that is not your own.

The challenge of Britishness

In Wales, Scotland and for Catholic participants in Northern Ireland they see the English as arrogant, superior and aggressive. Their opposition to the English means that they are hesitant in accepting a British identity because they think it places them in the same camp as the English. These nations want to be recognised as culturally and attitudinally different from the English. They also want to be seen as distinct and rich cultures in themselves. For Catholic participants in Northern Ireland the political, religious and historical associations that accompany the ‘British’ cannot be overstated.

However, young white people in England find it hard to distinguish between being English and British: the two appear interchangeable. The quantitative research also supports this theory highlighting that English young people are far less likely to think their English identity is more important than their British identity, than young Scots or Welsh people (38% among English people compared with 60% in Wales and 85% in Scotland). It begs the questions whether Britishness as a concept is propagated by, and only significant to, the white English population.

In that light, multiculturalism throws up a number of interesting questions. Ethnic identities have far more emotional resonance with black and Asian young people. Both black and Asian participants experience a complex layering of national and ethnic identities which become important in different circumstances. There are number of emotional bonds to their parent’s country of origin, and the message for instance, that “You are Nigerian” is constantly reinforced as their parents remind them of their heritage and their ‘otherness’ from the white community. This is despite the fact that young people acknowledge that at times they are caught between feeling part of their heritage and not being fully accepted by people in their ‘home country’. Again this is supported by the quantitative evidence with young ethnic minorities far more likely to disagree with the statement “Being British is more important to my sense of identity than my family’s country of origin” (43% compared with 29% among young white people).
They see local identities, such as being a Glaswegian, and national identities, such as being a Scot, and any ethnic identity as more important and emotionally relevant than the ‘supra’ British identity. The loose rule of Britishness holding together disparate cultures, histories and peoples leaves participants unconvinced. Some believe that trying to pin down or map out what it is to be British highlights differences between the nations and different ethnic communities, rather than creating a unifying banner which symbolises inclusiveness or social cohesion.

Furthermore, some feel that discussing Britishness or trying to pin down any values causes more confusion and dissent rather than being a solution to a problem – a problem they suspect is multiculturalism and integration. Some participants say that it is this fuzzy quality of Britishness that has so far allowed it to encompass the national and ethnic identities by default rather than by design. Britishness is to them a myth of unity, not a reality.

This collective identity highlights difference rather than brings people together. So, as an agent of social cohesion Britishness is problematic, not least for many young white people who perceive ethnic minority communities to be different from the British norm in their social and cultural beliefs. In some instances, young people feel threatened by the increased competition for jobs, resources and their freedom to question these differences between cultures and not appear to be ‘non-PC’ or even racist. As an agent of social cohesion young people are unable to see how Britishness as a shared social identity can work, taking into consideration multiple identities and ethnic, religious, social and cultural differences between communities, and the current geo-political climate.

Where next for British youth identity?

Given the challenges facing the ‘brand guardians’ of Britishness, the semiotic analysis asks a number of significant questions:

• How do we leverage powerful, motivating identities and ideas for young people in the service of Britishness?
• How can we identify the aspects of Britishness which do have resonance, given that when the whole package of Britishness is considered, it does not appeal?
• How do we link the two – ideas which are important to young people linked with a revitalised idea of Britishness?

The semiotic and qualitative analysis shows that the codes of Britishness are outdated (residual) and do not fit with the dominant contemporary society. Five key themes around dominant codes of our culture and specifically youth identity are: DIY identities focused on self determination where the re-invention and ‘project of the self’ is key; a democracy of creativity and the opportunities to share and display that creativity through new technologies; a dominant voice of the child on display in many facets of society and across all ages where showing emotion and using that to one’s advantage is acceptable (in contrast to the stiff upper lip code of ‘Old Britain’); a sense of an increasingly extreme meritocracy with society divided into winners and losers rather than equal opportunities for all; and, the centrality of personal history and very localised connections to identity.
The social contract has historically served as a tool for developing state-society relations; to teach values and gain loyalty.

These themes reflect the dominant interests and codes. These are important because if Britishness is to resonate particularly with young people, it is unlikely to ‘connect’ with modern society if it appears to clash with or not be accommodating of the features of these dominant themes. The dominant codes need to be considered because Britishness cannot simply be ‘re-packaged’ into these to revitalise it.

However, the wheels of individualism may be coming off. With concerns around the health of consumer society living in debt, the ‘want it now’ maxim starts to look particularly short-sighted; this element of modern culture is literally in danger of becoming bankrupt. There is a moral questioning of those whose focus is so heavily upon exterior beauty and conspicuous consumption.

The social contract has historically served as a tool for developing state-society relations; to teach values and gain loyalty. In Britain this was achieved through strong public services and the armed forces, nationally owned industries, and a welfare state focused on a ‘big tent’ mentality – where there were enough resources for all, given out by a secure British state. Now, our social contract is the subject of debate in contemporary culture. The assumed political deal young people strike with society is the focus of much discourse, especially on web discussions and in the press; and the tone is dissatisfied.

The challenge then in creating a new emergent sense of Britishness is to identify how the best of our residual ‘Old Britain’ and dominant codes of contemporary Britain can be brought into line. One way to build a new narrative of Britishness is to look at the ways such narratives have been constructed in the past and using the positive stories to bridge the gap between the old and new to make this nostalgia fit with the modern world.

Another way of doing that is to look for stories with an element of competition and distinctiveness, in particular narratives of Britishness about ‘being first’ and ‘being best’. For example, there was a lot of comment in the press that the British public made the greatest level of personal donations after the 2005 Tsunami, reflecting our generosity, international outlook and environmental concerns. There are also plenty of British idols who sum up ‘being the best’ in industry, inventiveness, daring and courage – such as Richard Dyson and Ellen McArthur.

The spirit of inventiveness expressed in DIY fundraising or campaigning is what makes this an example of new British identity, as is the way enjoyment and serious issues are seen to go hand-in-hand, marrying the responsible, concerned attitude of ‘old’ Britishness with today’s focus on ‘enjoying the journey’. On a smaller scale, young people are already taking this approach in their own lives where they volunteer, or act as mentors or role models in sports projects and other skills projects.

There is a lot of evidence pointing to the return of the community and teamwork not just via internet communities but also in sport and on television. One example of teamwork is the resurrection of Robin Hood by the BBC. The new version opens with Robin’s band of fighters amassing – each with a snippet of back-story, a sense of the family they leave behind, clear regional loyalties and accents, special skills and motivations. Their heritage and provenance are central to setting up these individuals, but also to building a new group. Indeed, this new group does not just learn to work together, but is depicted as forming a strong group identity akin to a new family. The portrayal of Robin shows the way he encapsulates some key contradictions – he is both the cynical, savvy modern individual, and also the responsible, moral and caring leader. This builds a classic ‘adult’ character – independent but not selfish, experienced but not too jaded to try and spur change.

Crucially, when engaging young people and talking about Britishness, an ‘Adult to Adult’ tone needs to be employed to dispel notions that Britishness is an identity that is being imposed on people. Young people need to see the value of being British through a change in their social reality. They need to be presented with real aims and tangible outcomes and the language of respect should be reserved for those students who have gone through a process or the journey. The tone of voice throughout needs to be ‘Adult to Adult’ giving young people the power to make decisions and rational judgments without appealing primarily to their ‘Child’ emotions. This ‘Adult’ voice has the potential to form a strong part of the new British identity. It is confident, discerning, self-determining but kind; it is constructive and pragmatic.

However, there is a price associated with this communication. For this to work, and cut through effectively, young people must also believe that the ‘Adult to Adult’ tone of voice offers them real choices and life chances. To paraphrase an old saying, we must ask not what young people can do for Britishness, but what Britishness can do for young people. If their associations with Britishness are within a discriminatory, punitive public sphere, where they are not given the resources and the chance to make a positive commitment, any new approach to communicating British identity will be unlikely to affect their feelings about their nation.

Therefore, a new Britishness may need to focus on the communications about young people as well as the communications to them; and communicators may also need to push for policy interventions to create places in young people’s lives where they can feel proud to be British.
As outlined in the introduction, the objectives of this research were intentionally set to be broad to allow young people and the research process to be discursive as well as intuitive. In this process, a number of key conceptual, emotional, rational and historical foundations that are entwined with national identity and everyday life have been examined.

A number of insights into how young people talk about and rationalize their own lives and assess the validity and ascendancy of a national identity within it have also been uncovered. However, thinking about national identity or just identity per se is a subconscious preoccupation for young people. The nature of identity is that it is a subliminal part of our subconscious and the events around us, the culture and history that shapes our society and the stuff of everyday life takes over and gets woven into the picture, almost with no effort on our part.

Despite often being considered collectively by adults, young people are not a homogenous group and have very different life experiences from each other. Many of the young people interviewed have limited experience of being abroad beyond package holidays and therefore are limited in their understanding of the relevance of national identity in the wider context. Exposure to other cultures or nationalities comes either from interactions on the internet or where young people live within a multicultural community in the UK. However, second generation ethnic minorities who visit their family or relations in their ‘home country’ say it takes a while to adjust to the new country, and that people can tell by the way they walk, their clothes and the way they carry themselves that they have not grown up in the home country; these reactions make living in Britain very real. However, regional identities can be stronger than a British identity. For instance, young ethnic minorities in Scotland, irrespective of their ethnic origin feel more Scottish than British.
Furthermore, young Muslim and black participants feel they are able to comfortably retain or assimilate their religious and ethnic identities with their Scottish identity, without much conflict, although the relative importance of a multiple identity changes depending on the situation. Participants from black and ethnic minority communities across the UK say that this fluidity is a subconscious part of everyday life but when one is either discriminated against or visits one’s parents’ country of origin their different alliances to ethnic heritage and where they live tend to be examined.

But there are also a number of unavoidable commonalities that form the foundation of issues that need to be addressed, or at least stay in one’s peripheral vision, when discussing young people and a national identity; such as the dominance of ‘Englishness’ in ‘Britishness’ and people's historical and cultural points of reference in each of the nations. History, culture and religion, the realities of immigration and living in a multicultural society and the varying degrees of knowledge on the subject do play a part in how young people rationalize or attempt to internalize what a national British identity means to them. But the arguments are fraught. Young people see a number of hurdles in the way of creating a singular national identity: ethnic and cultural diversity; religious and historical tensions between Britain and Northern Ireland and within sects; a north-south divide within England; and a lack of clarity about what being British adds to their social reality and the narrative of their lives.

The semiotic analysis shows that there are areas where Britishness and the perennial themes of youth do not mix (see figure below) such as, the traditional associations of Britishness with the inventiveness of youth culture.

By taking the best of what we know of British culture that may seem traditional and combining it with what appeals to young people we find that the way Britishness is thought about and discussed needs to change if it is to have any currency with young people. The discourse is Parent to Child which is hierarchical rather than an ‘Adult to Adult’ tone especially as this is a subject that is being forced upon young people. There is also the opportunity to harness the creative energy and inventiveness that is inherent in youth culture to channel it in a constructive way that gives young people an opportunity to learn and express new skills.

The semiotics offers some conclusions as to how these ideas can be taken forward to meet young people half way and without adopting an authoritative tone to communicate it; some of these themes are universal to other age groups. However, there is a price associated with this communication. For this to work, young people must also believe that Britishness offers them real choices and life chances. To paraphrase an old saying, we must ask not what young people can do for Britishness, but what Britishness can do for young people. If their associations with Britishness are of a discriminatory, punitive public sphere, where they are not given the resources and the chance to make a positive commitment, a new approach to communicating British identity will be unlikely to affect their feelings about their nation.

Therefore a new Britishness may need to focus on the communications about young people as well as the communications to them; and communicators may also need to push for policy interventions to create places in young people’s lives where they can feel proud to be British.

Some next steps for communicators

- Engaging young people in a debate about multiculturalism and reducing fear and prejudice (often inherited from media and adults), through educational initiatives that go beyond mandatory Citizenship lessons in school to more creative activities that harness their interest in other cultures and examining their own cultures.
- Young people need to know that there are advantages to living in Britain and being British. Communicating with young people on an ‘Adult to Adult’ tone as shown is important, giving them responsibility to use resources to better their future.
- Initiatives and opportunities, such as after school programmes to develop skills, train and pursue their interests with a sustainable outcome need to be made the norm for all young people, not just those with the financial means to hone their talents.
- Research into communications based on emergent codes – to assess their strength with real young people.
- Decisions to be made by campaigners as to how easily Britishness can be tied into policy innovations to make life genuinely better for young people today.
- The appeal of these new codes and narratives across the different regions nations and ethnic groups within Britain.
- An opportunity to harness the creative energy of youth by funding or creating projects where young people can work together, enjoy the process of learning a skill and be giving the responsibility to use that energy constructively.
Background and Objectives
Ipsos MORI was commissioned by The Camelot Foundation to conduct research among young people, aged 16 to 21 years, on the meaning of Britishness as a national identity. The study has been commissioned to bring to the debate young people’s perspectives on what a national identity means to them, the relevance it has to their lives and its currency in present day culture.

We would like to thank Samantha Hyde and her team at Camelot Foundation for their support and enthusiasm throughout this research. We would also like to thank all the young people who took part and shared their views with us, without whom this research would not be possible.

The three main objectives of this research are to:
- Explore young people’s views of Britishness
- Explore young people’s views on national identity
- Explore what Britishness means in everyday life.

Methodology
To meet these objectives, the methodology comprised qualitative group discussions, a quantitative survey as well as semiotic analysis of youth and British culture.

Qualitative phase
The qualitative research comprised 12 group discussions across six areas of the UK including a mixture of urban, rural, suburban, and deprived locations. In each area, two group discussions were conducted: one with 16 to 18 year olds and the other with 18 to 21 year olds. Each group consisted of eight participants. In total 96 young people participated in the group discussion.

Quotas were set according to age, education status, employment status, ethnicity and gender. Participants were also given a pre-task to complete before they attended the discussion. Six of the 12 groups were given a ‘life-book’ or diary to complete and the others were given a Polaroid camera with the task of taking pictures that represented their local community or their nation.

Fieldwork was conducted between 30 August and 20 September 2006 in London, Birmingham, Plymouth, Cardiff, Belfast and Glasgow.
The quantitative phase was conducted among a nationally representative face-to-face omnibus of 672 young people aged 16-21 years in Great Britain between 14th and 21st September 2006. Quotas were set and the data is weighted to match the national profile.

Fieldwork was carried out by LVQ Research.

Interpretation of qualitative research
It is perhaps important at this stage to include a brief explanation about why we conducted qualitative research with this audience and, furthermore, the strengths and limitations of this approach. Qualitative research provides a depth of understanding which cannot be achieved from a structured questionnaire. The free-flowing format of the discussions provides an insight into participants’ views and concerns, while seeking to identify not only what they know and think, but also how they do so. It is a flexible and interactive process and, therefore, it is possible to respond to the individual circumstances of each participant and to bring their experiences to light. Considering the complexity and wide scope of the topic of identity, a qualitative approach is essential to bring new insights to light.

Qualitative research is particularly useful when exploring attitudes towards, and perceptions of, complex, often subconscious issues such as one’s individual and group identity. It can often be the case that when talking about an issue that is relatively subconscious, qualitative research work much more effectively than a quantitative approach. It allows participants to reflect on and explore issues and to share their thoughts and experiences. It can provide an insight into participants’ views and concerns, while seeking to identify not only what they know and think, but also how they do so. It is a flexible and interactive process and, therefore, it is possible to respond to the individual circumstances of each participant and to bring their experiences to light.

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When analysing results from the quantitative findings it is important to note that the questionnaire was administered with the aid of prompted lists.

It is important to mention that qualitative research focuses on perceptions and not facts. However, perceptions are facts to those that hold them and, as such, are important to bear in mind even if the information is, technically, incorrect. Furthermore, qualitative research does not allow for the production of statistics from the data it produces. As such, throughout this report we have used terms such as ‘majority’ to infer a commonly held viewpoint across all young people and ‘minority’ to mean an opinion that was only expressed by a small number.

Verbatim comments provide evidence for the qualitative findings. To protect the participants’ anonymity their comments have been attributed according to gender, ethnic identity and/or religious (where this is of relevance), age and location. In some cases, the area or ethnic background from which the young person comes from lends a certain meaning to the comment and has been included especially.

Throughout this report 16 to 17 year olds are referred to as ‘younger participants’ and 18 to 21 year olds are referred to as ‘older participants’. When referring to themes that are common to both age groups, they are referred to as ‘young people’.

Semiotics

Semiotic analysis was undertaken to look at how British identity is constructed and how it operates in the context of youth culture. This phase was conducted because young people find it difficult to talk about the potential of different cultural ideas to shift their expectations and beliefs. While qualitative research takes an inside-out approach by asking people what they feel and think about an issue, semiotics takes an outside-in approach by understanding how culture shapes people’s perceptions and world views.

Qualitative research gives us a clear picture of how things are now and how people feel and perceive their social reality but it is limited in terms of how far it can ‘see into the future’ and identify potential for concepts and ideas to appeal. Some of these concepts are just too abstract, too transparent and are so ingrained as a part of the everyday landscape that it is hard to express their meaning.

A key element of semiotic analysis is to triangulate ideas found in one place in the culture with similar themes in quite different places. In this way, semiotics looks very widely to find themes which are so big and so ‘taken for granted’ in culture, individuals cannot always articulate them.

Semiotics is a process of desk research and observational research. It uses as its data all the ‘raw materials’ of cultural analysis such as print media, websites, comments, fashions, images, music under the name of ‘texts’. A text is simply a created item or element that carries cultural meaning.

In this study we looked at the mechanisms of identity, and how these are constructed across texts. Some of the key texts examined include British sport, books, magazines, film, television, advertising, music, online forums, historical narratives, school curriculum, the retail environment and general observation of shoppers, markets etc. More detail on the exact texts used can be found in the appendices. In examining all these sources, we remained alert to our key questions, took notes and collected examples and snippets that related to Britishness, identity and youth. As this process progressed, we met to compare findings, exchange ideas and brainstorm what we had found, to see what patterns and contrasts were emerging across these many texts. This allowed the process to remain iterative and flexible, with our exploration of texts and different areas being re-focused or expanded as our analysis progressed.

The semiotician investigates the artefacts of culture which surround young people, and questions the way they ‘make meaning’, rather than asking individuals what they think. In this project, we posed ourselves three different questions:

• What ideas, themes, and styles relate to identity for young people?
• What ideas, themes and styles relate to Britishness in culture today?
• Where is the potential positive overlap between them?

To answer the questions, we looked at a vast range of ‘texts’ or cultural artefacts, over a range of media and sources, to get a broad and deep reading on cultural messages, codes and patterns. The semiotic process involves looking at the texts and then interrogating them by asking a very clearly structured set of questions, about the ‘choices’ made by the text. These include looking at:

• Design
• Wording, language, discourse
• Imagery, colours, layout
• Topic selection, the way the topic has been approached
• What has been left out?

These are just a few relevant semiotic questions we asked of the texts in this study. A basic premise of semiotic questioning is to look at what is ‘taken for granted’ or ‘normal’ in the text; why is it that way, rather than another way? What does transparency hide? In answering these questions, we discover underlying cultural assumptions which are played out in the text, perhaps without the awareness or intention of the person who constructed it.
Interpretation of semiotics

Semiotics lets us identify important codes and patterns of meaning in contemporary culture and in this study specifically about Britishness and youth culture. Codes are signals found in texts that carry meaning. Codes can be clustered to create ‘families of meaning’ that can relate to cultural areas such as food or the internet.

It is important to remember these codes will keep changing because culture is dynamic and changes over time through ‘paradigm shifts’\(^1\). Semiotics can spot the points where codes change, by observing the cultural tension or energy around new ideas and ‘contested codes’.

By looking at different bundles of signals, and analysing how they met together to form codes, we identified:

- codes of British identity today
- codes of youth today.

And were therefore able to analyse potential overlaps between the two; we also identified examples of emergent areas within the culture, where there are signs that the two types of code already coexist fruitfully.

\(^1\)See appendices of main report ‘Paradigm Shifts’ Page 138
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