

# ***Consuming Brands***

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

### *Consuming Brands*

This research addresses the question, 'what is the relationship between young peoples' consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity'? It reveals consumption to be some way from the picture presented in postmodern analyses, which emphasise pleasure and play. Amongst my sample of twenty focus groups of late teenage students, concern about class and gender position and status, or what Bourdieu terms 'distinction', emerges as the key framework which informs their 'choices' as consumers, and their subjective sense of identity.

The judgements they make about self, other and group identity suggest consuming brands is a cultural practice which is marked by strong discursive, scopic and classificatory dimensions. These inform a series of popular stereotypes from 'Townies' and 'Skanky birds' to 'Essex boys.' Such categorisations are materialised in, and embodied by, teenagers' taste in, and use of, branded goods. They affect, not just those who are 'othered', but those who do the 'othering', reducing choice and contributing to forms of class and gender invective, social distancing and, drawing on Bourdieu's work, to wider processes of 'symbolic violence'.

In the context of these dimensions, and the prevalence of talk about bullying, my findings support the need for a more critically circumspect approach. Such a framework, needs to be one which is able to take full account of consumption as an embodied set of classed and gendered, material and symbolic, emotional as well as reflexive practices. *Consuming Brands* shows, young people's negotiation of the dilemma of a 'personalised versus commodified' experience of the self, is one fraught with social risks and emotional stresses. These are unequally shared in class and gender terms. The accounts given, of being addressed, and acting, as consuming subjects, reveal the contradictory nature of the subjective experience of consumption, psycho-socially, and the limited choice and agency, it affords.

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## **Dedication**

To the memory of William Sullivan and Julia Lomasney.

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# **Introduction**

‘Just do it?’

### **i. Contexts and Questions: 'Just do it?'**

Young people, so the clichés go, have never had it so good or so easy with so many chances and future possibilities. Nowhere, it seems, is this state of plenitude more emblematically manifest than in the choices offered to them as consumers. From across the airwaves, on their TV and computer screens and in the hustle and bustle of shops and malls, from sweets, soft drinks and mobile phones to MP3s, trainers, clothes and cosmetics - an unprecedented array of branded goods sparkle with the promise of product quality and much more besides.

In terms of beliefs, whether it's a concern to uphold social justice, as in the case of the Mecca Cola<sup>1</sup> and Black Spot trainers<sup>2</sup> or the Body Shop's attempts to champion (or colonise) ecological awareness or the Make Poverty History campaign, there is a brand that can say it for you. If it's a slice of the life of your favourite sports stars, musicians, actors or other celebrities then there's a brand of bag, watch or bracelet that can help you get it. If you want to sign up for one of the many street styles or subcultures, from skaters to urban, then you can buy the brands to signify your affiliation with any of these too. Brands therefore offer the chance to choose, not just objects or things, but something meaning rich and socially meaningful. They are 'commodity signs' (Goldman and Papson 1998:24-25) or symbols with which it is possible to be somebody who thinks it, says it and does it. As Goldman and Papson argue, brands encourage consumers to face down the panoply of contemporary injustices and to assail the barriers of discrimination whether those of race, gender, sexuality, disability or class. As well as the chance to identify with a range of values, beliefs and lifestyles, the ultimate prize they offer is the chance to personally transcend whatever obstacles block the path to individual self-fulfillment, happiness and excellence. Encapsulated in Nike's call to 'just do it', brands offer a space of self-transformation and transcendence and a zone of total self agency or 'pure voluntariness', as Cronin so aptly describes it (2000:273).

But Goldman and Papson ask 'what of the gap between image and practice, between humanism and capitalism, between moral philosophy and the bottom line of corporate

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.mecca-cola.com/> 10.55am Friday 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.blackspotsneaker.org/home2.html> 10.50am Friday 30th April 2004

growth?’ (ibid.: 184) How do young people take up the call to enter the space of ‘pure voluntariness’ that brands like Nike promise? It is this gap and the absence of critical study of teenagers’ experience of branded goods, with all their heady commitment to and exaltation of self agency and potential, that frames this research project. My overarching research question is therefore, what is the relationship between young peoples’ consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity?

Visiting their town or city centre shopping malls or venturing further afield to the West End of London, or out of town to Blue Water, Lakeside or their regional equivalents young people, on the face of it, have more to choose from than their predecessors, as the theorists of post-Fordism discussed in **Chapter One** purport to show. But how do they experience the processes outlined in **Chapter Two** which seek to address, subjectify and construct them as consumers and thus as choosing consuming selves? How do they experience being hailed or invited to consume so often and so much? With whom and what do they associate the brands and goods they buy? To whom and to what are they demonstrating their social affiliation with and their social distance from? How and why do they choose one brand or range of clothes over another? What are the consequences of these decisions for their sense of self, other and group identity? To make use of Giddens’ incisive formulation, how do they negotiate ‘the dilemma of a personalized versus a commodified experience of the self?’ (1991: 196) In short how do they do branded consumption?

My aim, therefore, is to present and critically analyse late teenagers’ experiences of branded consumption in line with the method outlined in **Chapter Three**. This method has been developed to address the criticisms of Hall (1988) (1992), Billig (1994) (1997) and others as to the lack of people, the ‘depopulation’ and ‘aridity’ of too much contemporary Cultural Studies, outlined in **Chapters One and Three**. With this in mind I hope to begin to fill this gap in previous work on consumption, given the absence of non-commercial research into young peoples’ experience of branded goods, to which I draw attention in **Chapter One**. The results in **Chapters Four, Five and Six**, therefore, attempt to answer some of the important questions raised above and to develop our understanding of young people’s subjective relationship with, and consumption of, brands and branded goods. Broadly speaking, **Chapter Four** focuses on the constraining or regulatory social dimensions of consumption which emerge from

the focus groups, **Chapter Five** examines the pattern of dispositions towards brands and branding which arises, and **Chapter Six** looks at the emotional economy of consuming brands.

## **ii. Background: The politics of production and consumption?**

As well as being concerned to begin to fill an important gap in the critical study of consumption, this research also emerged out of a growing political interest in it. More specifically the impetus for this project also arose out of the experience of being a grass roots activist in campaigns, unions and socialist organisations, over the past three decades. In relation to this experience *Consuming Brands* is partly the product of a dissatisfaction, with the tendency on the left to shrug off issues to do with consumption and being a consumer, for the heavier comment on, and harder analysis of, production. This dichotomy, which privileges the study of production over consumption, also manifests itself academically in the split between Cultural Studies and Political Economy approaches to culture and the media, as **Chapter One** demonstrates.

But however correct the general prioritisation of analysis of production maybe, the downplaying of, and relative silence about, consumption and its subjective effects on working people, I think amounts to a serious omission. To only concentrate on the macro or objective dimensions of privatisation and marketisation, whilst sidelining its psycho-social dynamics and subjective impact on ordinary people, is in my view mistaken. This is particularly true given the present global neo-liberal ascendancy which means, in ever more aspects of our lives, we are treated as consumers first and last, from cradle to the grave. Thus this thesis contributes, in a small way, to remedying this situation, by beginning to address some of the subjective consequences of this intensifying shift from the public to the private and from the collective to the individual. In particular my focus is on the ramifications which follow on from the incessant hailing of teenagers from working and lower middle class backgrounds as consumers, and not as citizens, one key hallmark of neo-liberalism (*cf* Bourdieu 1998).

## **iii. All consuming new times?**

But the dismissal of consumption as a topic of discussion by some on the activist left was not the only thing which drove this project. On the part of some on the academic left, particularly within a significant strand of Cultural Studies, another problematic

tendency has arisen. Rather than ignoring consumption as a serious object of study per se, this has involved analysing consumption too uncritically. Using theoretical input hewn from *Marxism Today's* assessment of changes in society and politics in Britain, in the eighties and nineties, and crystallised in the concept of 'New Times', cf 1. (2.1, 3.1), this work suffered from a number of weaknesses. These stemmed from its too rigid theoretical adherence to the tenets of post-Fordism, cf 1(2.1, 2.2), 1(3.1, 3.2). Thus, though it ostensibly maintained a critical perspective towards capitalism and the shifts in its structure, work which drew on *MT's* prognosis failed to adequately address the persistence of material, economic and social structural inequalities in relation to consumption. Most significantly, for this research, it has neglected to critically interrogate the dominant neo-liberal equation of freedom with choice, increased choice and in particular consumer choice, under capitalist social relations. Furthermore the scant attention paid to the psycho-social dimensions of contemporary consumption (Blackman and Walkerdine 2001) and particularly its 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977 and Skeggs 2004) and 'psychic stress' (Walkerdine et al 2001) has helped to perpetuate the 'black boxing' of 'choice'. Slater (1997) argues that this questionable market mechanism, with its tenuous underpinning, has gone largely unchallenged.

As a result of these omissions Culturalist work has presented a relatively easy target for critics whether they are political economists<sup>3</sup>, activists who wish to dismiss Cultural Studies analysis of consumption per se, or those whose views echo the cultural pessimism of the Frankfurt School. As the literature reviewed in **Chapter One** and **Two** shows, Cultural Studies, and more specifically Culturalist approaches to consumption - those which Lodziak (2002) clumsily dismisses as 'the ideology of consumerism' - whilst containing valuable work have inadequately engaged with both the subjective dimensions of structural social position, in relation to consumption, and its psychic stresses. Thus Culturalist approaches have tended to overestimate the subjective possibilities for social agency, change, transformation and mobility afforded by consumption, ignoring the psychic costs and social constraints involved. As I argue

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<sup>3</sup> See the exchange between the Marxist political economist Nicholas Garnham and Lawrence Grossberg, one of the foremost defenders of Cultural Studies, in Garnham, N. 'Political Economy and the Practice of Cultural Studies', in Ferguson and Golding (1997) eds, and Grossberg, L. (1997) in 'Cultural Studies vs Political Economy: Is Anyone Else bored With This Debate?' in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (12) 1.

in 1 (1.2, 2.6) this has occurred partly because of their basis in abstract and overly generalised extrapolations from the meta-theory of 'Fordism' and 'post-Fordism' combined with a particularly voluntarist reading of the work of Foucault on the self, identity and subjectivity. Addressing these omissions and weaknesses, the impact of class, on young people's understanding and experience of branded consumption, in particular, emerges as a central concern in **Chapters Four and Five**. The psychic stress engendered by the experience of choice, and its ideological adjudication through 'taste' (Bourdieu 1986), within the broader emotional economy of consuming brands, forms the focus of **Chapter Six**. Oddly perhaps, given the historical roots of Culturalism in a combination of humanist Marxist history and the turn to radical anthropology and ethnography in the 1990s, *cf* 1 (2.4, 2.6), it has ironically ended up mirroring the lack of critical engagement with peoples' subjective experience, which can be a weakness of left analysis more generally.

This study of consumption therefore also takes its cue from an interest in social life at the micro level of subjective psycho-social experience. Again this is not an area of strength for left analysis or Marxist theory. Despite some exceptions (notably Harvey 2000 and McNally 2000), too much time has been spent knocking the turn to the subjective, the personal or the body in the social sciences. But surprisingly perhaps, as I have intimated above and will show in more detail in **Chapters One and Two**, such a focus on the study of the subjective dimensions of experience and, in particular, its psycho social dimensions isn't really that strong a point for contemporary Cultural and Media Studies either, as a range of researchers and writers have pointed out (*cf* Blackman and Walkerdine 2001, Billig 1997). *Consuming Brands* is intended therefore as a contribution to redressing this imbalance in the critical coverage of both consumption and subjectivity. By adopting, as far as possible, a people centred approach empirically, as outlined in **Chapters Two and Three**, I have focused on what it means subjectively, to be continually addressed as a consumer through discursive categories which are often closely linked to the hierarchy of branded consumption and marketing classifications (Blackman 2001:193). In doing this I hope to avoid the twin pitfalls of abstraction, in ungrounded people-less meta-theorising, as well as an excess of description over analysis.

#### iv. Consuming brands, class, gender and symbolic violence

It can be all too easy to dismiss those who ‘B & Q it’, who take up the injunction to ‘shop till they drop’ or who may seem mall bound. This is particularly the case when there exists a ready to hand gallery of easy to apply stereotypes of the passive consumer as couch potatoes, eating their TV dinners, and devouring their next pizza etc. But significantly I think, without exception, these types and stereotypes are class based. One has only to recall the grotesque figures of Harry Enfield’s sofa strapped working class slob Wayne and Waynetta or his caricature of a 1980s working class Thatcherite, ‘Loads of money’, to be reminded of this.<sup>4</sup>

*Consuming Brands*, therefore, examines the processes involved in the circulation of such pejorative social stereotypes around consumption, and the motivations behind subjective investment in such a malign typology of class and gendered ‘others’.

**Chapters Four, Five and Six** show how the intense marketing focus on young people as consumers, through practices of branding, can act to reify social life. ‘Brands’, as one young man from Basildon puts it, ‘help us to class ourselves’[7.BEM]<sup>5</sup>, encouraging the classification of self and other according to a system of status distinction, which parallels the hierarchies of branded goods. Thus at times, the descriptions they give of their relationships with others is premised on perceptions of social worth judged according to choice of brands, and taste in consumer goods more generally, in a manner which conflates the value of people with the price of their things. It is through, what I call discursive and scopic processes of objectifying, fixing and distancing socially, that some young working class men and women both stigmatise others and are themselves stigmatised. This occurs as a result of the adjudication of their choice and ‘taste’ in branded goods, as a key and highly visible part of their habitus<sup>6</sup> or embodied disposition (Bourdieu 1986). **Chapter Four**, in particular, illustrates how a powerful regulatory discourse or a regime of what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’ (1977), when applied through such judgments of taste in branded clothes and other consumer goods, helps to maintain class boundaries. I argue, therefore, beneath the everyday throwaway rhetoric of ‘euphemisation’ in which class

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<sup>4</sup> Recent updates include Enfield’s teen terrors Perry and Kevin; *Little Britain*’s ‘chav teen nightmare’ Vicky Pollard; Catherine Tate’s, Lauren, the teenager who is not ‘bovvered’ as well as the roster of working class caricatures in the BBC’s *Shameless*, who rework the, ‘poor but happy’ motif.

<sup>5</sup> This refers to focus group 7. Basildon Essex Men, referencing is explained in **Appendix One** p269.

is implicitly raised, and explicitly effaced," a form of 'denigration' occurs. Through a lexicon of casually registered and humorously articulated class inflected terms and types, from 'townies' and 'skanky birds' to 'carrot crunchers' and 'Essex boys', class boundaries and 'distinctions' are all the more effectively maintained and legitimised (Bourdieu *ibid.*).

To give one detailed example from the focus groups, the term 'Essex girls' constitutes one such euphemised, geographically displaced and denigrated class grouping. Amongst a group of young Basildon men, 'Essex girls' are judged as falling foul of their standards of good taste. The Basildon boys argue, 'Essex girls' infringements against 'decency', 'respectability' and 'style' are evidenced by their imputed dress, disposition and typology of behaviour. 'Essex girls' always wear, 'white boots tucked in' and are obsessed with 'big' clothes, 'skinny figures' and bicker uncontrollably over who's wearing what, they claim.

**(7.BEM.22)**

**A** ...and then you have you have like all the girls the Essex girls dare I say it that wear that wear sort of like white things

**H** They do don't they

**A** They do you know about those boots you were going on about it's always white boots tucked in

**H** Or blue or

**I** Do you find that erm Essex girls they try and keep their figure as skinny as possible but they will wear clothing to such an extent that it makes them look big

**A** Yes

**I** You know those girls that wear puffy clothes

**(7.BEM.28)**

**A** Yeah even arguments between two girls they come in wearing the same thing and they're

**I** Oh yeah 'I said I was gonna buy that (A Yeah) and I was gonna wear it today' 'yeah but I wanted to wear it' 'yeah but I'm wearing it take it off'

These two extracts demonstrate how these working class women are 'vulgarised' and debased by their social designation as 'Essex girls', a classification which attaches to their embodied style of dress and physical disposition all the pejorative tropes of class, gender and sexuality, currently available. These descriptions, I think, contain the same 'pathologising register of working class women' Skeggs discovered in newspaper

articles and columns (2004: 112). Class and perceptions of class position or status, judged through 'taste' in brands, and the subjective work and emotional economy around making and adjudicating such consumer choices, emerge therefore as major concerns for this study. Such a concern, with the subjective dimensions of class experience, follows on from the work of Willis (1977 and 1990); Skeggs (1997 and 2004); Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) and, Charlesworth (2000), in particular.

Yet it is crucial to my argument also that these processes of class based rhetorical social distancing and stigmatisation are not, by any means, wholly characteristic of young people's orientation towards brands and branded consumption. As **Chapter Five** argues, a 'kaleidoscope of opinions' (Billig 1988) emerge across the focus groups as part of a range of contradictory embodied dispositions. These include, what I characterise as, the **Practical Critical**, **Practical Creative**, **Critical Ironic** and **Radical Critical** dispositions towards brands and branding more generally, as well as the **Submissive** and **Practical Appreciative**. These are significant, I argue, for three reasons. Firstly, because of the challenge their emergence presents to the dichotomy of the 'active' versus 'passive' consumer, which has shaped so much work on consumption, in Media and Cultural Studies. Secondly, because of the stress I place on the embodied nature both of the six dispositions and the persistent materiality of branded goods themselves. Thirdly, following on from this, these dispositions are important because of the role the emotions play in them, particularly with regard to how young people understand their feelings and emotional states in relation to practices of consumption. The emotional dimensions of consumption thus form the focus of **Chapter Six**.

#### **v. Method: central research question**

Finally, in addition to its emergence from a political interest in the neglected subjective dimensions of consumption, this project also grew out of my experiences as a lecturer in an East London Further Education College in the 1990s. That roller coaster decade of consumer driven boom and bust was also the time in which consumption, and the global brand in particular, came to the fore in popular fashion and culture. It was also the decade when brands and branding became the object of some insightful critical analysis, notably Klein's *No Logo* (2000), and of some high profile political activism and campaigning.

One of the most striking things about my experience of that decade was the competitiveness I observed, as part of the daily social interaction between many of the young people I taught. This was often focused on consumption and wearing the right brands of clothing in particular. When it came to facilitating focus group discussions about this, I think, I was able to do this in a way which encouraged the kind of open exchanges I refer to in the Methods chapter 3(4.2). Thorough planning, which meant the logistical set up for each session was carried out well in advance, was obviously a key component of this. However, making the groups comfortable enough to talk in involved much more than attention to detail, and careful structuring, using guidance sheets (*cf* **Chapter Three** and **Appendix Two**). As I explain later in 4(4.6), having a shared social disposition with many of the participants was crucial to establishing the safety of the groups and thus to making them habitable and conducive to fruitful discussion.

Returning to my central research question, ‘what is the relationship between young peoples’ consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity?’ this question crystallises my approach to the issues raised by consumption. It is, therefore, structured to explicitly recognise, and address, the importance of the subjective experience of consumption and the possibilities it may provide for the expression of identity. However, it also recognises the limits placed on those possibilities by foregrounding the status of ‘branded *goods*’, as material commodities, not just symbols in a ‘weightless’ culture. My overarching research question is thus designed to connect to, and engage with, the wider remit I have set out above. It seeks to address both the limitations and gaps in recent studies of consumption, within the context of the broader cultural, theoretical and political debates I have just introduced.

My research, therefore, aims to combine critical analysis of the political economy of consumption with its emotional economy. This is because, as I have stressed, understanding how young people consume and are addressed as consumers, is crucial because it marks the subjective spot where the tectonic plates of macro economic strategy and management meet with the micro demands and desires of the self. Thus these scalars converge around the neo-liberal invocation to choose, and to be an individual self-agent, one who can take on both the opportunities and the burdens, the anxieties and the pleasures, which such an emphasis on self-agency calls forth.

Reebok's current campaign<sup>6</sup>, 'I am what I am', loudly and proudly articulates the prevalent neo-liberal rhetoric of self-agency and responsibility articulated through consumer choice. It is to the burning question of how young people respond to this intense ideological calling, to transcend through choosing and consuming, and to the demanding emotional and reflexive dialectics this invocation brings, that my research therefore turns.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Reebok's 'I am what I am' campaign [www.reebok.co.uk/iawia](http://www.reebok.co.uk/iawia) and, in particular, the TV spot adverts and list of quotations from iconic youth stars and celebrities including Mike Skinner of The Streets. Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2005 at 1.30pm.

# **Chapter One**

## Theorising Consumption

# 1. Introduction: Commodity, Consumer, Consumption

This chapter provides an initial analytical framework with which to focus on the literature relevant to my research question, *what is the relationship between young peoples' consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity?* Part one, offers a critical overview of existing literature which attempts to theorise consumption, examining the commodity, the consumer and some key initial theoretical approaches to consumption. It also lays out the five gaps, in current work, which have shaped the development of my research.

Part two, looks at debates about consumption in their wider contexts. The origins of post-Fordism are critically examined. I also introduce the two overarching perspectives in the study of consumption, Culturalism and Structuralism. Culturalism and Structuralism respectively, suggest that consumption is, in terms of cultural practice and the sense of identity of the consumer, *either* an enabling *or* constraining activity. These paradigms are then discussed in relation to the development of Cultural Studies' approaches to consumption. The accusation of 'cultural populism' made against this work is assessed. Moving beyond this initial dichotomy, part three consists of a more detailed examination of some contemporary Culturalist takes on consumption. These are brought into dialogue with a number of key critics of this kind of approach. Part four, summarises the theoretical terrain covered, giving a short overview of what may be fruitful in the various competing perspectives outlined. This chapter, therefore, sets up and frames the debate on the degree of agency exercised by consumers. It addresses one of the key subsidiary questions raised by my research - what is the nature of agency or 'choice' for young people as consumers? This is examined more closely in **Chapter Two**.

## 1.1 Understanding the commodity and its duality

In both economic and cultural terms, it is crucial not to underestimate the importance of consumption. Understanding that artifacts such as clothes, shoes, cosmetics, food, furnishings, bikes, cars and all the other things, that we consume everyday are material commodities - objects fashioned by 'alienated' (Marx 1975:322-30) human labour into goods for sale at a price - and not just signs, as postmodern approaches infer, is the corner stone of my approach. For Marx, to whom we owe the primary conceptual debt

here at least<sup>7</sup>, understanding goods in capitalist society, have a distinctive form as ‘commodities’, provided the first key to unlocking the entire set of mechanisms behind the whole capitalist mode of production. He argued that the wealth of capitalist societies, presents itself as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities’ (Marx 1999:13). My investigation of brands, therefore, also begins with analysis of the commodity. Adding to the above, Marx offers us what, I think, remains one of the most suggestive and succinct definitions of the dual nature, and complex role, of commodities in consumption.

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its own properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance they spring from *the stomach* or from *the fancy*, makes no difference. (ibid.:13) [*my emphasis*]

Interestingly, recent interventions in debates about the meaning of consumption, from those who take their cue from ‘Actor Network Theory’ [ANT] (Dant 1999, 2005, Lury 2004), contain a strong echo of his position. Lury (op. cit.), argues, brands are ‘complex objects’ with multiple dimensions ontologically, they are neither sign nor object but both. For Dant there is, therefore, little point, in simply studying either, objects or subjects, commodities and consumers in isolation. The key is to study the shifting possibilities for agency which the relationship between the two affords (2004).

However, despite these affinities between aspects of ANT and Marx’s materialism, a significant strand of critical theory has unequivocally dismissed Marx’s opening definitions of the commodity, in *Capital*, as reductive<sup>8</sup>. I would argue, on the contrary, they are striking, precisely because of the preliminary exposition they contain of his argument that commodities have a profound duality, and that they have both ‘use’ and ‘exchange values’<sup>9</sup>. In particular, Marx’s claim that commodities could satisfy both

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Smith, first conceptualised objects for sale at market as commodities, but value came not from the quantity of labour expended in his political economy, (this was to be Ricardo’s original insight on which Marx built his labour theory of value), but from the natural price equilibria set by supply and demand. Cf Callinicos, A. (1984: 52-57)

<sup>8</sup> Cf Baudrillard, J. ‘For a critique of the political economy of the sign’ in Poster, M. (ed) (1988: 64-75).

<sup>9</sup> For Marx use value refers to an object’s ability to satisfy needs, ‘the utility of a thing makes its use value.’ ‘Exchange Value’ referred to the rendering of particular use-values into commodity form through an abstract and generalisable form of value which would facilitate their transaction in markets, ultimately reducible to price. Exchange value appears as ‘the proportion in which values in use of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort’, Marx (1999: 13-14). I would argue, contrary to Baudrillard, Marx essentialised, neither ‘use’ or ‘need’ and would concur with Slater who argues, the Hegelian tradition running through Marx meant he did not ‘reify human nature in the form of fixed set of basic needs.’ Cf Slater, D. (1997: 130).

‘wants’ of ‘the stomach’ or ‘the fancy’, recognised the potential any object has to become an emblem or signifier of desires, hopes, cultural value and social belonging, without losing its status as a material object. Thus, as Voloshinov argued, half a century later, ‘any consumer good can be made into an ideological sign’ (1986 [1929]:10). These initial definitions are important because they immediately raise the key theoretical controversy which has shaped the field of enquiry. *Is consumption to be understood primarily as symbolically and culturally driven or as satisfying material ‘needs’?*

## **1.2 The relationship of consumer to commodity**

In the hands of conservative political economy, the answer to this question remains weighted in favour of the latter explanation. ‘Needs’, are unproblematically sourced to individual demand, created by the consumer. Demand, simply awaits its marriage to supply, and thus the fulfillment of need takes place via Smith’s ‘hidden hand’. This “value for money approach”, Lee argues (2000: pxiv), reduces consumption to the product of rational thought and calculation. From this perspective, consumers simply evaluate their best option, on the basis of the goods on offer, and they ‘freely’ meet their ‘needs’ or ‘wants’, given the market choices available.

Thus, the ‘naïve instrumentalism’ (Lee: *ibid.*) which informed this take on consumption encouraged an absolute lacunae about the cultural, symbolic and expressive dimensions of consumption, the duality of the commodity introduced above. Such economistic approaches to consumption persist today, in the form of the ubiquitous ideology of markets, free choice and ‘sovereign consumers’. However such ‘instrumentalism’ only serves to raise more fundamental questions. Notably, *what is meant by the term ‘need’? Are needs natural and essential or are they historically and culturally relative? Are needs the creation of producers, and their intermediaries, in the marketing industry? What is the extent, and broader significance, of, the degree of choice available to us in choosing to consume one object or commodity? And more fundamentally, how does freedom of choice, as a consumer, equate to conceptions of freedom per se?* Slater argues that it is these awkward questions which conventional economics side steps, black boxing the question of needs and reducing them to the concept of ‘exogenously’

existing demand or 'preference for utilities'(1997: 46-54)<sup>10</sup>. But why we buy what we do, what these goods mean to us, and what needs they fulfill, are critical questions if we want to understand consumption, in relation to the constitution of the self, and our sense of self and social identity.

The economic idea of the 'sovereign' rational individual consumer going to market, was critically problematised by two key figures of late nineteenth and early twentieth century sociology. Veblen (1925) and Simmel (1904) opened up the possibility that consumption could be understood as a profoundly social activity. Ergo, it was not simply a matter of individual agendas and calculus but was thoroughly imbued with meanings, understandable only by reference to wider society, its hierarchical class structure and social relationships. Thus, in their seminal work, another key question was brought to the fore. *What is the salience of the social or 'positional' aspects of consumption?* (Lury 1996:45) Veblen and Simmel, therefore, drew attention to the possibility that the consumption of commodities could act as an index of wealth, status and social standing. Furthermore, if consumption could act as the objectification of social categories and values, this signalled it was about much more than the abstract individual pursuit of preferences for commodities, chosen on the grounds of instrumental economic utility.

### **1.3 Alienation and/or the social lives of things**

Further enrichment of our understanding of the commodity, has come from the field of anthropology. Appadurai (1986:3), and others, offer a critical approach to 'the social life' of things, an insightful (if semantically cumbersome) reversal of the focus of analysis of consumption on 'the things of social life.' Thus, Appadurai suggests, we consider the potential of objects to be brought to life, though a lifecycle, which encompasses both commoditised and de-commoditised, processual moments (Kopytof in Appadurai *ibid.*:72-76). His formulation, therefore, both echoes and challenges Marx's opening analysis of the commodity in *Capital*, as a series of alienated objects of our labour. These, he claimed, reappear to us in the market place as mystified and reified objects, to be transacted in an apparently arbitrary exchange of value.

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<sup>10</sup> Slater, argues, for the economic approach, 'need' is an 'independent variable' which does not necessitate explanation. It is simply a matter of the 'private agendas' of individuals expressed as the 'facts' of demand, the number of people prepared to buy a product at a specific price, thus it engenders market not cultural research (*ibid.*: 50).

Appadurai, thus, echoes Marx in his focus on how things might be brought to life, but he challenges Marx's view of this as a negative part of, what Lukács called, the 'reification' of social life (1971:83).

For Marx, the loss of the more organic and transparent relations between production and consumption, and producer and consumer under feudalism, brought about by the rise of commodified market relations under capitalism, negatively transformed the status of objects. Commodities took on a magical life of their own in the eyes of the workers who made, but no longer owned them. They became 'fetishised', endowed with apparent supra human powers conjured up by their capacity to relate to each other in markets, as objects of value - beyond human control.

As soon as it emerges as a commodity, it (a table) changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands on its head, but evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx *ibid.*: 163 in Lee 2000:10)

Appadurai, despite recognising the common ground between their respective perspectives on the commodity form, and Marx's 'ambiguity' about its status, pressed the point of divergence with him. There was, he argued, a need to break "significantly with the production-dominated Marxian view of the commodity, and to focus instead on its total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution to consumption" (1986:13). By doing this, Appadurai highlighted another possibility, that commodities could be brought to life. This argument has become central to the analysis of consumption. Thus, Lury for example, has argued, "the use or appropriation of an object is more often than not both a moment of consumption *and* production, of undoing and doing, of destruction and creation" (1996:10). It was this idea, that consumption was not simply an endpoint after production and that it constituted an ongoing rich meaningful process, which Appadurai argues, Marx never explicitly developed. However, it is just this culturally productive side to consumption, which Marx, I would contend, did recognise but left largely unelaborated, as he pursued the negative social dynamics and pathological dimensions to consumption, unearthed by the commodity fetishism thesis.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For Marx, consumption was productive too and not simply a passive end point to production. Though at times he comes tantalizingly close to Appadurai's argument, and Lury's conception of consumption, describing for example how a dress only becomes a 'real product' through being worn, and thus through

The argument for the cultural productiveness, social significance and meaningfulness of consumption, was left to be pursued and developed most keenly within the fields of social and cultural anthropology, as well as within Cultural Studies, as we will see later, (cf 1.2 and 1.3). As Leiss points out, following Sahlins (1976), even the most apparently basic of physical necessities food, shelter and clothing are “firmly embedded in a rich tapestry of symbolic mediation” (Leiss 1976 in Jhally 1990:5). Douglas and Isherwood (1979) went further, by insisting, goods matter “less for what they can ‘do’, and more for what they ‘say’” (Lee 2000:56-70). They argued, ‘forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing and shelter... try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking’ (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:77).

Douglas and Isherwood also challenged one of the key methodological assumptions of early attempts to understand consumption. They attacked the methodological individualism<sup>12</sup> of classical economic theory which still underpinned much contemporary work on consumption, at the end of the 1970’s. Drawing on the socially based insights of phenomenology, structuralism and ethnomethodology,<sup>13</sup> they argued against the idea of locating the individual agent, as the sole source of meaning in consumption.

No human exists except steeped in the culture of his time and place. The falsely abstracted individual has been sadly misleading to Western political thought. (ibid.: 78)

Grant McCracken’s analysis (1990:83-85), which points us towards, what he terms, the ‘investing’ and ‘divesting’ of meaning in objects, further reinforces the case for the thoroughly social, and cultural, nature of consumption. For McCracken, investment of meaning refers to the processes whereby individuals create meanings for objects. This is, of course, accomplished within the broader social framework of the meanings, ideas,

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the ‘active’ consumption of the ‘subject’, he none-the-less stops short and doesn’t advance this insight, preferring to conceptualise it as ‘using up’ and ‘destroying’ products. See Marx, K. (1976: 18-19)

<sup>12</sup>Methodological individualism has been summarized by Jon Elster as ‘the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and change) are explicable only in terms of individuals – their properties, goals and beliefs.’ Marxism, Functionalism, and game theory, *Theory and Society*, 11, 4, 1982, quoted in Callinicos, A. (1988:76-77)

<sup>13</sup> Drawing on Berger and Luckmann, Lévi Strauss and Cicourel respectively, Douglas and Isherwood summate Phenomenology as situating knowledge of external reality in the social context of ‘individuals interacting together [to] impose their constructions upon reality; Structuralism as system of knowledge which again ‘transcends the efforts of the individual thinker, and focuses upon the social processes in knowledge’ and ethnomethodology as a system of thought which ‘takes for granted both that reality is socially constructed’ and that ‘it can be analysed as logical structures in use’. Douglas and Isherwood (ibid: 78-79).

signification and discourses in circulation, in and through, the media and the cultural industries, including advertising and marketing. The dynamics of how people are addressed as consumers is dealt with in **Chapter Two**.

Moreover, McCracken argued, meaning can be invested or transferred not only from the media and the world of advertising and fashion to goods (*cf* Berger, 1972, Baudrillard, 1998, Williamson, 1978, Jhally, 1987 and Goldman and Papson, 1998), but also through practices of consumption such as 'possession, exchange and grooming' (McCracken 1990:86-87). In other words through the everyday subjective use of goods, including mass produced commodities, objects are personalized and creatively adapted to suit individual needs.<sup>14</sup> Two very different examples of this personalization illustrate this. Anderson's research, on brands and identity, claims young people's use of mobile phones expresses both a sense of group affiliation, having the same brand of phone as their peers, but also individuality through personal modifications such as ring tones, logos and covers (Anderson 2004). Wapner et al have shown, the importance of elderly people taking treasured possessions into care accommodation<sup>15</sup> (Wapner, Demick and Redondo 1990: 299-315).

These arguments again draw our attention to perspectives which challenge conceptions of consumption as being solely about using up of goods, and as the end point of production. Thus, Miller's argument, contra Marx, that consumption can overcome alienation, creating not the objectified and alienated world of 'fetishised' goods but a 'potentially inalienable' realm of cultural goods, as people attempt 'to extract their own humanity through the use of consumption' (Miller 1995:31). Commodities, in this analysis, can be decommodified via the practical activities of everyday consumption. What McCracken calls the 'substantiation of cultural categories in goods' (McCracken 1990:74-75), means that everyday objects can provide us with, 'the opportunity to make culture material.' This might be in terms of representing societal categorisations relating to age, sex, class or space, time and occasion. Thus we now face a further set of questions in relation to the dynamics of consumption and identity. *Who 'creates' the*

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<sup>14</sup> As well as this investment of meaning, 'divestment' takes place when goods are cleaned, repaired and redecorated for sale or exchange.

*cultural meaning and significance of commodities? What relevance do notions of the 'social life of things', and 'decommodification', have in understanding contemporary branded consumption? Are commodities, and branded goods, in particular, used to signify/express individual or group affiliation?*

#### **1.4 The consumer and society: class distinction, taste and disposition**

These social positional, anthropological, and cultural communicative perspectives, on consumption, provide a useful set of approaches with which to understand the subjective relationship between young people and branded commodities. These two strands of critical analysis continue to inform much debate. This is particularly so, given Pierre Bourdieu's synthesis of them, in his detailed anthropological and sociological excavations of the workings of 'taste', in relation to class.<sup>16</sup> In Bourdieu's work 'distinction' emerges as a conceptual combination of the social positional aspects of consumption, in relation to the setting and maintenance of the boundaries of class identity, fused with the cultural values and aesthetic meanings consumption signifies through the concept of 'taste'. This theoretical union, summed up in Bourdieu's formulation, 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier' (1986:6), explicitly draws together the symbolic and cultural meanings of consumption, with its social positional role in the expression and reproduction of class relations. He argues that:

social subjects classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (Bourdieu *ibid.*: 6)

Thus, each social class or sub-class fraction, for Bourdieu (1977:95), defines their identity and differentiates themselves from others by virtue of what, and how, they consume. Each class, therefore, comes to inhabit a collective milieu, or a 'habitus' of goods and practices of consumption, towards which they are 'disposed'. This occurs through long term processes of the inculcation of 'know how' or 'cultural competences.' The accrued knowledge from the display of such competences he defined as 'cultural capital.' He argued, 'a beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines' (*ibid.*:2). Bourdieu's embedding of the ideologies of taste and class into the body, in the ontologically 'deep' concept of the

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<sup>16</sup> Lane J, (2000) gives an excellent overview of the dialectics of production and reproduction in Bourdieu's work, pp194-196.

'habitus', signalled an approach which shifts beyond a focus on the rational, and conscious, to the role of pre-conscious embodied perception. His work on the 'habitus' emerges as of particular importance, when we move to the results and analysis of why, and how, young people consume brands.

### **Five key gaps in current work on consumption**

A number of theorists working in the field of Cultural Studies - from Featherstone (1991) to Mort (1996) and Lury (1997) - have drawn on Bourdieu's work. Though their particular postmodern takes on consumption, and consumer culture, have proved to be insightful, there are significant oversights, gaps and areas of weakness in their work, both in relation to their take up of Bourdieu, and more generally.

Firstly, all three authors - albeit with differing degrees of critical caution and complexity - draw on Bourdieu's theoretical conception of the emergence of new middle class fractions<sup>17</sup>. These are seen as central actors in the battle for positions in the field of culture, and in particular to the valuation of specific sets of cultural practices/activities, through which sub-classes legitimize themselves. This theoretical focus on these new middle class fractions is potentially of great value. However, in the work of Mort (1996) and Nixon (1996), especially, it leads to a downplaying of the significance of consumption activity amongst working, and lower middle, class people. Hence Mort's 'topographies' of taste in eighties and nineties London have much to say about those at the cutting edge of consumer practices, and the make up of new 'styles of life', such as the media professionals, designers and style leaders, who make up London's 'style cognoscenti' (Mort 1996:149-199). Despite the fact that Mort maintains the possibilities for expressing new forms of social identity, and modes of masculinity, through consumption, is limited by 'economic power and status' (ibid.:206), in practice he says very little about consumption, outside the ranks of powerful elite groups. Thus, he all but ignores questions to do with the wider social impact of their ascendancy on the field of class relations, and on topographies of taste.

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<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu, describes the emergence into the social field of a set of new *petit bourgeoisie*, rich in social and cultural capital, whose power rests on their ability to act as intermediaries between the major classes and whose work in education, the media and psychological professions constitutes a key part of the process of the transformation of the capitalist 'mode of domination' from 'repression' to 'seduction', from 'policing' to 'public relations'. (1986:152 -154)

Secondly, these theorists took up, too uncritically, the theorisation of capitalism as having entered a post-Fordist phase. Their engagement with 'Regulationist' political economy provided the practical grounds for developing a particular concept of lifestyle, through, what is seen as, a new more differentiated and responsive mode of production, (cf Hall and Jacques 1989). It is this imputed economic transformation, which provides the material basis for a conception of identity which sees it as expressed through the expanded range of choices available to consumers.<sup>18</sup> Thus, from decisions about clothing, to household furnishings, and from preferences in food and drink, to cars, all such options are treated as the basis of contemporary 'lifestyles'. These lifestyles, in turn, are characterized by 'individuality', 'self expression and stylistic self-consciousness', in contrast to the 'grey conformism' of mass consumption (Featherstone 1991:82). It is the extent of this transformation, both quantitatively and qualitatively, which, I think, needs much more careful critical elaboration. As I show below, by critically re-assessing the 'post-Fordist' thesis and attending to consumption, as a part of the mode of production, I hope to address the criticisms<sup>19</sup> made of Cultural Studies' approaches to consumption, cf 2(2.3 to 2.6).

Thirdly, there is a further problem with these authors' conception of the relationship between consumption and identity. This is *not* the claim that consumption 'choices' are culturally significant, in terms of self-expression or self-identity, this is an axiomatic feature of all consumption<sup>20</sup>. Thus Davis (1992), Slater (1997) and Entwistle (2000), have all drawn attention to the ephemeral nature of social encounters in urban streets, where "we mingle with crowds of 'strangers' and have only fleeting moments to impress one another" (Entwistle 200:112). Moreover, Entwistle cites Finkelstein's argument, that it was just this very experience of modernity which encouraged the judgment of others on the basis of appearance and dress. 'Clothing is frequently seen as symbolic of the individual's status and morality, whether actual or contrived' (Finkelstein 1991:128).

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<sup>18</sup> Morley notes the paradoxical echo of Marx's base superstructure here. Cf 'Postmodernism The Rough Guide' (1996) in Curran, Morley and Walkerdine (eds).

<sup>19</sup> Garnham argues Cultural Studies, 'recognises the existence of capitalism', but fails to adequately analyse the mode of production (1997:60).

<sup>20</sup> As I pointed out in the opening sections.

In the past two decades, examination of the modernity, identity, consumption dynamic has produced a wave of insights from social theorists, notably, Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Bauman (1991). These authors share a focus on the importance of the relationship between self-identity, as a reflexive project of modernity, and the crucial role played by an expanding realm of consumption practices in this. Warde argues that Beck, Giddens and Bauman all concur: ‘people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they display’ (1994:878). I will return to Giddens’s work on the reflexive self in **Chapters Two, Four and Six**.

The difficulty is, rather, that Mort and Nixon use a tripartite frame of analysis which links media representations in magazines, and advertising, to consumer identity and consumption, with little investigation of the subjective element of how people actually accept, refuse or otherwise negotiate, identity or subject positions. This approach inclines, therefore, to an overly abstract, performative and symbolic view of identity. As such, consumption is disembodied and not sufficiently grounded nor bounded, discursively and materially, *cf* **Chapter Two**. Their approach, suggests consumption is an arena of unproblematised autonomy, agency and subjectivity. Despite the critical calibration, I have recognized, in their work above, consumption, in the hands of Mort and Nixon, remains cut adrift from questions of access to, and the development and deployment of economic, cultural and social capital. It still neglects questions to do with agency, the nature of choice and autonomy, as experienced by real embodied human subjects. Woodward cautions:

Poverty and inequality offer significant counterarguments to the claim that we are what we buy and that consuming identities afford greater agency to those who buy into identity positions through consumption of goods and services. (2002:84-85)

The fourth problem is that Cultural Studies’ work on consumption, far from overdoing it, has not turned thoroughly enough towards understanding and theorizing the subject. Nick Couldry argues: ‘cultural studies has provided relatively few insights into how individuals are formed, and how they act, ‘inside’ cultures’ (2000:45). This argument will be dealt with, in detail, in **Chapters Two and Three**.

Finally, therefore, my empirical research design, aims to move beyond textual, or quantitative, approaches to the analysis of consumption. I aim to do this by focusing on

the subjective experience of young people, instead of inferring what they may think/feel, from analysis of changed modes of representation, and textual readings. Outside market research little work has been done to examine the varied dimensions of young people's relationship with, and use of, branded goods. The critical literature which exists operates at the macro level and it contains little reference to the study of subjective experience. Goldman and Papson's *Nike Culture* (1998), deconstructs the many signficatory mobilizations of the 'swoosh' to signify everything from, hope of individual transcendence of poverty, to gender empowerment. But, these authors tellingly ask, 'what of the gap between image and practice, the gap between humanism and capitalism, between moral philosophy and the bottom line of corporate growth?' (ibid.: 184) It is precisely this gap, and the absence of sustained critical study of young people's experience of branded goods, that frames my research.

## **2. Consumption in its wider contexts**

### **2.1 Post-Fordism?**

Cultural Studies work drew heavily on the French strand of political economy known as the Regulation School, despite its theoretical and empirical limitations. To understand how the work of the likes of Mort, Nixon and Featherstone was influenced by their work, and to appreciate the wider ramifications of the Regulationists' impact on the study of consumption, and in particular, the tendency to 'dematerialise'<sup>21</sup> it, necessitates a short detour.

Regulationists, such as Aglietta (1979), Boyer (1988) and Liepietz (1986), understand the history of capitalism as a series of distinct modes or phases. These phases most notably Fordism, are shaped by the interplay and contradiction between what they describe as the 'regime of accumulation' and the 'mode of regulation' (Brenner and Glick 1991:47-50). Consumption was pivotal for the Regulationists because, they claimed, a key structural contradiction developed between the 'regime of accumulation' and 'the mode of regulation' and this centred fundamentally on the underconsumption of goods. Thus the disparity between what was produced and consumed (ibid.: 48-50), was the key to explaining capitalism's periodic crises.<sup>22</sup> Responding to these crises necessitated restructuring production and consumption. The aggregated impact of these

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<sup>21</sup> Slater (1997:193-196).

<sup>22</sup> The form of crises is important. Brenner and Glick argue they are, 'cyclical, non-threatening and self-regulating' (1991: 48-50).

crises and the responses which followed could, they argued, lead to the emergence of new distinct phases or modes of capitalist development.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not this happened depended on the precise nature of the dynamic between the ‘regime of accumulation’ and the ‘mode of regulation’.

The **‘regime of accumulation,’** the first part of the Regulationists’ conceptual model, referred to ‘the pattern of productive organisation within firms’ (ibid.: 49) and the detail of how capital was created. There were two possibilities here. Firstly, capital could be created through an ‘extensive regime’ of accumulation - an increase in the size of the workforce and an intensification of the labouring techniques, of workers, by lengthening the working day (ibid.: 48-49). The alternative was an ‘intensive regime’ of accumulation, and growth in production achieved, “predominantly via investment in fixed capital,” in production plant or machinery which “embodied technical advance. This created the potential for regular increases both in “productivity and in mass consumption” (ibid.). The **‘mode of regulation,’** the other part of the Regulationist’s model, referred to the network of institutions, rules and laws under which capital accumulation took place. Included in this were the dynamics of inter-capitalist competition, wage-labour relations and the level and type of credit, and most importantly, the amount and type of state intervention and regulation.

The most significant point to be made about these two aspects of their model is its ‘functionalist’ conceptual scheme, (Callinicos in Albritton et al eds 2001:234). A new stage in the mode of production, such as ‘Fordism’, comes to fruition when consumption and production are brought into alignment. This can be achieved through adjustments to the ‘mode of regulation’, such as those which constituted the post-war social settlement.<sup>24</sup> Thus, they argue, in the immediate post war period, within the ‘regime of accumulation’, production and consumption were made to match. They reached a state of equilibrium, because of the conditioning of each by the ‘mode of regulation’, in the form of state interventionism, known as ‘Welfare Keynesianism’<sup>25</sup>. According to the Regulationists, wages were set at just a high enough level, because of

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<sup>23</sup>Brenner and Glick outline three modes of development I) A competitive mode of regulation with an extensive regime of accumulation, for most of the C19<sup>th</sup> (ibid.: 50 -75). II) Intensive Accumulation But Still Competitive Regulation (ibid.: 75 -86). III) Fordism or Intensive Accumulation and Monopoly Regulation. (ibid.:86-96)

<sup>24</sup> In the industrialised world.

<sup>25</sup> For the post-war settlement see Anthony Crossland’s book *The Future of Socialism* (1956).

socially and legally institutionalised labour /capital relations, collective bargaining mechanisms and pay bodies, so as to facilitate sufficient purchase of goods in order to generate economic growth (Brenner and Glick *ibid.*:86-88).

However, the problems with the Regulationists' analysis of the phases of capitalism, and their 'disproportionality theory of crisis' (Callinicos *ibid.*: 230-244), are significant and multi-dimensional. Empirically, the historical evidence contradicts their assertion that capitalist crises centre on underconsumption, and a mis-match between the rate of growth of productive capital compared to consumption.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, theoretically, the Regulationists' abstract delineation of what was specific to capitalism, at particular historical moments, meant they downplayed the continuities, according to Brenner and Glick. Thus they ignored the destructive effect of general 'competition', which drove 'obsessive capital accumulation' (*ibid.*: 106). The general weakness of Regulationist theory is therefore that it fails to take into account the broader enduring systemic dynamics of capitalist social-property relations, that form the backdrop to their institutionally defined phases (*ibid.*). Underestimating the enduring features of capitalism, and overestimating the impact of transformation, is a weakness of much Cultural Studies also, I would argue.

## **2.2 Economic Transformations: 'New Times' and new consumption?**

Thus, it was the Regulationists' work which provided 'New Times' thinkers, such as Hall (1989), Murray (1989) and Leadbeater (1989), with the initial set of conceptual tools to argue the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism, had taken place as a primarily *production* centred mode of production, shifted to one that centred on *consumption*. The most important implication of this supposed transformation, as set out in the 'New Times' thesis, was that production could, following the breakdown of Fordism in the 1970s global economic crises, be made to measure, and match with, consumption. Thus, the key systemic contradiction within Fordism, aligning production to consumption and supply to demand, was apparently overcome. Moreover, in the 'New Times' scheme, the old drabness and homogeneity characteristic of Fordism, with its mass production for mass markets was transformed. Following a cyclical crisis of

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<sup>26</sup> In the period preceding the Wall Street Crash and Great Depression, Brenner and Glick show there was 'no decline in the rate of growth of total consumption' and thus no crisis of underconsumption. In fact the rate of growth of consumption was greater than in 'any previous decade' (from 1890) and remained at a higher rate than anything recorded in the data right up to the 1980s (*ibid.*).

underconsumption, post-Fordism emerged, it was argued (*cf* Murray in Hall and Jacques 1989). This was characterised by a regime of 'flexible accumulation' and a much more colourful heterogeneity of customised, small batch, 'just in time' production responsive to demassified niche-markets (*ibid.*). It is this move, based on what Brenner and Glick, have shown are decidedly shaky theoretical and empirical foundations, which I think needs much more careful critical scrutiny.

Though some important doubts about 'New Times' thinking have been raised, notably by Angela McRobbie (1994:30-37), the bigger underlying empirical and theoretical limitations outlined above, are overlooked. Thus Featherstone, Lury, Mort, and Nixon (*op. cit*) have all explicitly drawn on 'New Times' thinking. Utilising the concept of post-Fordism, such work argues commodity consumption has been transformed into a new much more expressive, individualised and aestheticised realm of individualised 'lifestyle culture', or what Mort describes as a series of 'cultures of consumption' (1996). Various designated as post-Fordist (Murray 1988), post-industrial (Bell 1974) or disorganized capitalism (Lash and Urry 1987), the hallmark of these new times is said to be a consumer led mode of production, in which individualized consumption has intensified to the point where it now drives production. Furthermore, this transformed capitalism is the hub of an increasingly 'stylised' (Lury 1997:78) set of consumption practices which foster 'a calculated hedonism' (Featherstone 1991:86). This consists of the pleasure to be had from a calculated temporary loss of control, through moments of consumer excess, enjoyed without apparent risk. Initiated by the 'new middle classes'<sup>27</sup> (*ibid.*: 34-35), this hedonism forms part of a bigger picture of an unprecedented creative self-reflexivity on the part of more and more consumers.

Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make a lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. (*ibid.*: 86)

The argument about the 'stylisation of consumption' (Lury 1996: 52-78) was stretched further by input from post-structuralist theory. Thus, the old certainties of traditional class, gender, race identities, were replaced by a much more individualized, and rapidly shifting flux of 'lifestyles' and 'subjectivities' (Benhabib 1994:41-49). The

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<sup>27</sup> NMC is Featherstone's term for workers in 'symbolic production' in advertising, media, fashion and design.

consequences of this paradigmatic shift, in conceptions of identity, are explored further in **Chapter 2**. This alleged sea change, with regard to the nature of consumption, produces further questions including: *Is consumption consumer led? What is the nature of the commodity today?*<sup>28</sup> *Has consumption been aestheticised and individualized? To what extent/how does the experience of branded consumption shape identity?*

In overall terms, the question, *who can and can't pursue consumer hedonism?* emerges from the debates around these developments as central to my research project. In my view, both production and consumption have been significantly restructured over the past two and a half decades. But the tendency, within Cultural Studies to make abstract generalisations about consumption, on the basis of the 'Regulationist' paradigm, and the post-Fordist thesis, in particular, is problematic. It combines an insufficiently critical engagement with a 'functionalist' theory of 'phases' of capitalist transformation, with a lack of critical circumspection about change *and continuity* in the economy, and society. These inadequacies in Cultural Studies take up of political economy are dealt with in much more detail in 1(3.1 to 3.3).

### **2.3 Two key perspectives in the study of consumption**

Broadly speaking there are two competing overarching paradigms which have shaped Cultural Studies' approaches to consumption. The view that consumption can be creative culturally, and enabling in terms of identity, developed from a number of theoretical positions which can be grouped together under the broad term 'Culturalist'. This overarching theoretical perspective has formed the backdrop to the development of the discipline of Cultural Studies. Culturalism, represented by key figures, in the intellectual genealogy of Cultural Studies, as diverse as the historian E. P. Thompson, the literary critic Raymond Williams, the theorist and ethnographer of consumption Paul Willis, and more latterly in the work of key figures such as Angela McRobbie and Frank Mort, has been incisively and concisely summated as follows:

It conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; and those practices, in turn as a common form of human activity; sensuous human praxis, the activity through which men and women make history....The experiential pull in this paradigm and the emphasis on the creative and on historical agency, constitute the two key elements in the humanism of the position. (Hall 1980a:198-199)

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<sup>28</sup> Lee, M. Critically explores the concept of ideal type commodity forms under Fordism and Post-Fordism (1999: 119-137).

Culturalism stood antithetically opposed to the other central paradigm in the field, 'Structuralism' in which as Hall has put it:

the subject was 'spoken by' the categories of culture in which he or she thought, rather than speaking them....' Experience was conceived, not as an authenticating source but as an effect: not as a reflection of the real but as an 'imaginary' relation between them. (ibid.: 201)

Despite their antinomies, Hall described this theoretical dichotomy as not necessarily unproductive, providing both positions were held in constant theoretical tension. As he put it, "though neither structuralism nor culturalism will do, as self sufficient paradigms of study, they have a centrality to the field....because between them...they confront-even if in radically opposed ways – the dialectic between conditions and consciousness" (ibid.:195-205).

## **2.4 Structuralism and Consumption**

Perspectives emphasising consumption as constraining, arise from a concern to attach proper weight to the influence of social structures, in the "dialectic between conditions and consciousness" (Hall 1980a: ibid.). Historically, structurally constraining views, of consumption, are linked to the Frankfurt School and their pessimism about the effects on the working class of the commodified mass culture provided by the culture industry. In *Enlightenment As Mass Deception*, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued, 'the stronger the positions of the culture industry become, the more summarily it can deal with consumers' needs, producing them, controlling them.' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944:15)

Thus, the notion of consumption as a set of enabling practices and as a site for creative agency would have been a complete anathema to Adorno, Horkheimer and their followers. The culture industries, they argued, reduced art and culture to the mass distribution of an endless series of candy coated events and objects. This confirmed mass consumers' powerlessness in the face of an objective system, which overwhelmed them and maintained total, social control. They argued, ominously, the culture industry ensured, 'something is provided for all so that none may escape' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944:45) As Adorno and Horkheimer saw it, under the influence of this monolithic culture industry, consumers were "victims" (ibid.:13). They were

manipulated by a cultural machine which sold back their alienation to them, encouraging “obedience to social hierarchy” (ibid.:11), rather than the fight against it. The influence of Structuralism, in combination with ‘Marxism’ and psychoanalysis, further encouraged the view of consumers as malleable subjects of ideology and passive dupes of the cultural industries.

Twenty years later, Herbert Marcuse’s analysis in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), reinforced the negative perspective on mass consumption. He emphasised, the constraining power of capitalism to control needs, by infinitely expanding them, so as to simultaneously frustrate their satisfaction. For Marcuse, this involved a complex process of manipulation, of consumers, as corporate capitalism functionally unleashed a range of ‘false needs’ (ibid.:7), satisfiable only within the system. In, what he termed, a process of ‘repressive desublimation’ (ibid.: 59-86), these needs were met, at least until the next round of ‘false needs’ were created, by the marketing industries. This happened at the enormous social and psychic cost of ignoring the underlying ‘true’ need for non-alienated creativity. Workers were paradoxically trapped in their role as consumers. The psychological suffering caused by being deprived of unalienated labour was intensified, and made worse, by the work it was necessary to do in order to be paid enough to satisfy, through consumption, the ‘false needs’ which substituted for their lack of unalienated labour. Thus, Marcuse’s model of capitalism, envisaged it as a closed circuit, a functional system which perpetually connected alienated labour to commodity consumption. In this model, consumer ‘creativity, consciousness and rebelliousness,’ as Slater (1997: 125) argues, were totally ruled out.

This critique of consumption from the left, found an echo in liberal right thought as Galbraith (1987: 126-133) and Vance Packard (1960:20-25) attacked the role of advertising. They argued, the marketing industries were unwanted intrusions into the economic sphere, corrupting the operation of the market and the world of the ‘sovereign rational consumer’. The utilitarian logic of the market, they argued, was turned upside down, as industry endlessly constructed ever more needs, instead of just meeting and matching existent ones – as conservative political economy had suggested.

## 2.5 Culturalism: consumption as ‘cultural populism’?

It is argued, by some that the tension in theoretical approaches on the agental dialectic between subject and structure in cultural theory, which Hall recommended above, has collapsed. McGuigan (1992), Williamson (1986), Garnham (1990) and Philo and Miller (2001), most recently, have berated Cultural Studies for moving towards, what they claim is, a naive celebration of popular cultural forms and practices. This imputed lack of critical circumspection has lead, these critics argue, to an ‘anything goes’ approach to texts.

Thus, Cultural Studies work, they insist, encourages the idea there’s no need to worry about ownership and control of the media etc, since there’s always the possibility of progressive political redemption, through subjective agency, in the form of creative interpretation and reworking of existing texts. In the case of John Fiske, this amounts to a ‘terminally uncritical populism’, for McGuigan (1992:49). Cultural Studies’ work on consumption, he argues, fails to balance the dialectic of agency and structure. And, it is the separation of the political economy of culture from Cultural Studies which has produced this failure, and ‘disabled the field’, because of ‘a terror’ of ‘economic reductionism’ (McGuigan *ibid.*:41). According to Tudor (1999), a pattern emerges, of a shift in the weighting attached *from* structure *to* agency, and thus from, objectivist to subjectivist, accounts of consumption. Agreeing with Giddens, that a drift to subjectivism, the standpoint which asserts the human agent is the prime mover in sociological analysis, has characterized sociological analyses, Tudor argues this has been ‘paralleled in modern Cultural Studies’ (1999: 183-184). Attempts to think beyond the limits of the subjective/objective dualism via an engagement with Gramsci’s work, in the decade from the mid-1970s onwards, floundered, Tudor argues. They were severely undermined by the ‘spread of subjectivism in the form of audience ethnography and cultural populism,’ (*ibid.*) to the point where, as far as he is concerned, the project of a critical Cultural Studies has been lost. According to such detractors Fiske’s work, on active audiences,<sup>29</sup> exemplified this move away from the structure/agency dyad, towards a much more voluntaristic subjective approach to consumption.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf Fiske, J. (1987 or 1989).

There is, I think, a case to be answered here. A significant strand of Cultural Studies work on consumption has, it seems to me, paid insufficient attention to the 'limiting' dynamics of structures - whether material or discursive, and to the constraining effects of cultural, economic and political power - on subjective agency. The theme of sub-cultural resistance through consumption style was given new impetus by the work of the French theorist Michel de Certeau, whose work on the 'tactics or art of the weak' (1984:29-42), in particular, influenced Fiske, the leading proponent of the *active* consumer/audience paradigm. In his work, de Certeau's conceptual tools were conjoined in a productive *mélange* to critical insights gleaned from Barthes, Voloshinov (1929:80) and Bourdieu, as well as his own interpretation of the later work of the CCCS<sup>30</sup>, and Hall and Morley.

The result, in Fiske's case, certainly, was a form of analysis which increasingly broke away from the kind of structural constraints on consumption, implied in Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980b:128-138). As a result the supposedly autonomous action of active agents, whether readers, viewers or consumers, was given free reign, in Fiske's work, as their hermeneutic, interpretative and creative potential overcame both textual and social contextual constraints. Drawing on an analogy with economics, in *The Popular Economy*, Fiske explained his reasoning. Meanings in the cultural economy, in terms of audience readings of texts, 'did not exist as the end point of a linear economic transaction' (Fiske in Storey 1994: 498-499) as in the case of the closed exchange of monetary value. The polysemy of the sign,<sup>31</sup> he argued, meant that the conditions existed for popular control of the media since, "there was popular cultural capital in a way that there was no popular economic capital" (ibid.). Thus, we arrive at a position in theories of consumption, as developed by Fiske, in which the consumer is apparently set free, symbolically, to make whatever meanings they like, and to make whatever use they want of the goods on offer. Thus, the undoubted cogency of Garnham's argument that Cultural Studies, 'overwhelming focus on consumption, reception and interpretation exaggerated the freedoms of daily life,' particularly with regard to Fiske's work (Garnham 1997: 60).

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<sup>30</sup> Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University which for three decades was at the forefront of developing Cultural Studies. cf Barker (2004:21-22) for a pocket history.

<sup>31</sup> As highlighted by Voloshinov in *Marxism and The Philosophy Of Language*

## 2.6 Consumption in the theoretical trajectory of Culturalism

However, the overall picture is far more complex than the critics of Cultural Studies propose. To assess the claims of 'cultural populism' made by McGuigan, Garnham, Tudor and others, necessitates a brief overview of how Culturalism developed. It was from within a theoretical orbit shaped by the influence of Thompson's humanist Marxism and its history from below,<sup>32</sup> from Williams approach to culture as 'ordinary', (1989:4) as well as from the development of sub-culture theory, that the Culturalist approach to consumption emerged. Critics claim this orientation meant work in Cultural Studies 'cut loose' (McGuigan 1992:77) from structural concerns to do with economic and material institutions, processes, relationships and classes.

Debating Grossberg, Garnham, argued that Cultural Studies, by shifting its analysis from class position and relationships to identity politics, was guilty of just such a separation of structure and power. Using Grossberg's (1997) own words of caution about the possibilities for subjective agency afforded by consumption, Garnham admonished Cultural Studies for creating 'the illusion' one could 'escape' (Garnham 1997:61), both structure and power. Such a problematic switch in emphasis from structure to agency, according to Tudor (1999:105-136), was shaped by the impact of a further series of theoretical developments in the 1970's - most notably Barthes' seminal shift to post-structuralism in *S/Z* (1974). This move itself, he argues, took place within the wider context of an increasingly critical, if not out-rightly hostile,<sup>33</sup> engagement with Althusser's Structuralist Marxism, which reduced culture to ideological domination or the articulation of 'imaginary relations' (Althusser 1971:121-173).

What then are we to make of the broader charge against Cultural Studies, that it has dropped any serious engagement with the structures of power in society in favour of a celebration of the potential for agency through cultural practices? Undoubtedly Tudor is right to argue the break up of structuralism was an important theoretical development. One clear consequence was the rejection of notions of ideological domination through the structures of language, texts and subject positions.<sup>34</sup> He also argues, rightly I think, that these paradigmatic shifts laid the basis for the emergence of a distinctive approach

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<sup>32</sup> Cf Thompson E.P. (1980) and ([1975] 1995) for a critical dismissal of Althusser.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson (1995)

<sup>34</sup> An approach to textual ideological analysis primarily associated with the journal 'Screen'

towards the study of culture, which McGuigan, Garnham and others claim tacked decisively towards subjectivism, voluntarism and populism. Within the schema of this trajectory, however, such critics infer that William's concept of culture as 'a whole way of life' (1965:63) and 'a structure of feeling'<sup>35</sup> became a matter of much too much 'feeling' and too little 'structure'. Yet, one of the most significant results of these changes in theoretical orientation was Hall's influential reworking of Gramscian notions of 'hegemony' (Hall 1976 in Hebdige 1979:16).

There are, therefore, a series of problems with this critique. Firstly, as Grossberg has argued, Garnham's haste to admonish Cultural Studies means he misses out on its point of departure from Political Economy. Whereas Political Economy, 'trivialises' consumption and equates it too tightly with the 'production of commodities,' (Grossberg 1997:74) unlike Political Economy, Grossberg maintained, Cultural Studies *was interested* in consumption, as a set of cultural practices in which people used 'the limited resources they were given to find better ways of living', and 'increased the control they have over aspects of their lives' (ibid.). However, Grossberg also took great care to argue, that Cultural Studies should not analyse consumption outside of the structures of the capitalism, but from within them. 'The structures of power in the world', and how they operated subjectively, must be understood alongside, 'the possibilities for challenging those structures' (ibid.). Whilst there has been a tendency within Cultural Studies to depart from this approach, most notably in the work of Fiske, other researchers and writers have continued to analyse consumption, within this framework, as I will demonstrate shortly. Secondly, McGuigan and others, despite the acuity of their criticisms of 'populism' and 'textualism', underestimate the productivity of a more focused analysis of the subjective experiences, feelings and actions which constitute cultural practices, such as consumption. They also fail to appreciate the lasting legacy of Hall's seeding of Gramscian notions of hegemony, which I raised above. Because of this, they also down play the contribution made by Paul Willis (1972) and John Clarke's (1976) formative work on working class sub-cultures and in Dick Hebdige's, *Subculture: the meaning of style* (1979).

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<sup>35</sup> A foundation stone in the development of British Cultural Studies, at the CCCS in the 1970's

Sub-culture theory combined a focus on subjective experience with the Gramscian approach to agency, struggle and power, introduced above. It meant culture was no longer reductively understood as an objectively imposed structure, part of the Althusserian ‘apparatus’ (1971: *ibid.*) of ideological domination. The analysis of ‘resistance through style’ by Willis, Clarke and Hebdige, charted a very different and new perspective on post-war consumer society. It highlighted the potential for the ‘creative recontextualisation’ (Miller 1987: 120) of the objects of mainstream culture, which I discussed earlier on, *cf* 1(1.3). In a number of seminal studies, Hebdige’s theoretical amalgam of Barthesian practices of ‘bricolage’<sup>36</sup> and the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’ (Gramsci 1971), demonstrated how culture, understood as a negotiated and contested site of meaning, could become the site of active resistance – from within the structures of the capitalism. Thus everyday objects, clothes, cars and furnishings could be taken, juxtaposed with other objects, and made to *resignify*, resisting hegemonic values. Miller argues, therefore, that consumption as resistance “rescued the possibilities of mass materials from the derogatory attitude of the mass culture critique” (1987:119). Finally, whilst this movement towards conceptualising audiences and consumers as active creative agents, did not move decisively beyond the subject/object society/individual dualisms, it did mark the beginnings of an important process of exploring subjective experience and identity, within culture. As **Chapter Three** shows, this productive, subjective legacy has shaped my own approach.

To sum up then, whilst critics of Cultural Studies draw attention to those like Fiske, whose work supports their case, a whole strand of work which has kept the macro economic structures of capitalism, and structural factors of class, gender, ‘race’ and other power inequalities, firmly *in* the theoretical frame, is ignored. Willis’s work (1978, 1988, 1990), for example, whilst centering on an ethnographic investigation of the cultural activities of young people, including their everyday consumption of music and clothes, used a conceptual framework which engaged with both the class inequalities and contradictory effects of economic power. He argued, for young people, ‘informal cultural production, symbolic work and creativity’ facilitated ‘directly personal subjective meanings and possibilities of change.’ As ‘the market’ makes its

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<sup>36</sup> Hebdige, D. (1987:16) ‘The bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse....when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message is conveyed.’

profits, he explained, so it also produces materials for 'oppositional symbolic work.' Thus, 'the remarkable, unstable and ever unfolding contradiction of capitalism supplying materials for its own critique' (Willis 1990:139).

McRobbie's work too, reveals an increasing concern to locate fashion consumption within the broader dynamics of material production. Recognising the efficacy of some of the criticisms made by materialists such as McGuigan, and political economists such as Garnham (1990), McRobbie highlights the lack of critical attention paid to 'questions of exclusion from consumption and the production of consumption' (McRobbie 1997:73-74). She argues there has been an unhelpful tendency to ignore awkward questions such as, 'how much the shop assistant is being paid' and to analyse 'meaning systems' in isolation from 'relations of power' (ibid.). Beverley Skeggs' (1997) longitudinal study of how ordinary women live out class and gender identities, as categories and positions in social relations, opted for a specific focus on the subjective experiential dimensions of 'relations of power'. It was precisely this subjective framing of her research which was so difficult and yet productive. Far from auguring a collapse into the pitfalls of 'subjectivism' or 'methodological individualism', Skeggs' work powerfully reveals aspects of social experience which exist within individual women's subjective mediation of the social world, and their negotiation of class and gender categories, positions and relationships, in particular. Her research opens up the texture of culture, beyond the limitations of seeing it as either, objectively imposed, or self created, in the terms of the familiar Structuralism/Culturalism dichotomy.

With regard to the relationship between gender and class identity, a key concept developed by Skeggs' is 'disidentification' (1997:13), or women's lack of fit with both social and ascribed subject positions. This, she argues, produces coping strategies of dissimulation, hiding one's class position, by trying to 'pass' one's self off, as a middle class woman - if you are working class. As will be seen in the results of my study, anxiety about class position and strategies of dissimulation are central to young men and women's experiences of consuming brands. Unpacking where, and how, women stand in relation to the category 'feminist', Skeggs uncovers a complex but highly suggestive series of mediating experiences of social, economic and political power, which cannot be understood without reference to the women's position as working

class. Against the orthodoxy of 'identification', she argues, the women in her study spent much of their time disidentifying themselves from the category of 'woman', in feminist address, instead preferring, much, though not all of the time (1997:156-157), to identify themselves with femininity. The explanation for this, according to Skeggs, is that gender disidentification is a product of class relations. It arises, paradoxically, from working women's desire not to be recognised as working class women. Thus, they identify with the category 'feminine' as a signifier of class, and in particular middle class, respectability.

Their subjectivities come to be produced through processes of disidentification and dissimulation, showing how the dialogical judgmental other is central to their productions and how class operates at an intimate and emotional level (ibid.:13).

Skeggs argues, performance of subjectivity is always framed by the backcloth of 'power relations,' so that 'investments' can be 'made and capitals lost and or/enhanced' (ibid.:165). These examples suggest approaches to cultural analysis far removed from the caricatures of some critics. For Storey, across its lifetime, the same point applies to Cultural Studies. 'It is the Gramscian insistence ..., learned from Marx, that we can make culture and we are made by culture; there is agency and there is structure' (Storey 2003: 61). His, commendation of Gramsci's dialectical approach, to cultural agency and structure, will be worth keeping in mind as we turn to consider more recent Cultural Studies work on consumption. This work has certainly attempted to frame the analysis of consumption within an overall account of changes in the economy. However, as I suggested earlier, the Regulationist political economy, upon which this analysis is built, contains significant weaknesses.

### **3. Cultures of Consumption?**

#### **3.1 Contemporary consumption: 'New Times' and post-Fordism?**

Frank Mort's, *Cultures of Consumption*, is an important example of a post-modern take on consumption, in 'New Times'. Mort, a key contributor to that thesis (*cf* Hall and Jacques 1989:160-172), begins his study of 'masculinities and social space, with an eloquent narrative of the impact of the 1980's Thatcherite credit booms, industrial restructuring and the heady discourse of 'consumer revolution' (1996:4).

His commentary highlights the claim,<sup>37</sup> that changes to commerce and retailing, ‘involved nothing less than a profound reorientation of beliefs, ... a movement from production to consumption led values.’ This, together with Bauman’s *Exit From Politics* thesis (1988:34-38), demonstrates the stakes are high, in determining the significance of consumption. Mort, offers a comprehensive explanation of the development of, what he sees as, a new post-Fordist mode of consumption created through the design and use of innovative material objects, and discursive representations, in men’s retail. Thus, store design, layout and furnishings, advertising, magazine fashion features and, the clothing, cosmetics and style products themselves – all helped to shape a series of changes in the meanings of masculinity. Mort concludes, a *relatively new*<sup>38</sup> mode of consumption had played a major cultural role in shaking up conventional notions of masculinity, creating a new and more ambivalent space in which less dichotomized articulations of masculinities were emerging, expanding the ‘number of social identities offered to young men (ibid.:205).

Mort argued, there was a fusion of the economic and cultural spheres, in the distinctive shape of a small, but highly culturally ‘tuned in’ group of influential entrepreneurial ‘cognoscenti’ (ibid.:8). It was these key figures who successfully produced, according to Mort, a new ‘we’ of identity in masculinity and the space for a new ‘community of men’ (ibid.:74).<sup>39</sup> This new form of masculinity soon moved into the mainstream discourses of advertising, retail and publishing, becoming known as the ‘new man’ (ibid.: 79). This achievement was based on the rise of *The Face*, a new innovative style (and proto-men’s) magazine, under the triumvirate of founder Nick Logan, graphic artist Neville Body, and photographer and ‘stylist’ Ray Petri. This became the hegemonic pitch on which a coalition for a new ‘cultural authority of style’ was formed. *The Face*, Mort argued, dynamically ‘undercut, confused, rendered ambiguous, bent’ and ‘softened masculinity as a gender’ (ibid.: 45-73). In the process Petri and his collaborators, laid the commercial golden egg, by creating a homosocial gaze<sup>40</sup> (Mort: ibid.: 59 and 71-72). This enabled men to look at other men, turning mass men’s fashion into niche man’s style (ibid.: 55).

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<sup>37</sup> Made by The Henley Centre (Mort 1996: 134-145).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Mort dispels the myth that addressing men as consumers was somehow new.

<sup>39</sup> Albeit at the price of feminine exclusion (ibid.:83).

Yet, whilst Mort was busy analysing the development of a post-Fordist flexible mode of consumption<sup>41</sup>, in high street stores such as Next, George Ritzer (2000) was documenting the global proliferation of a less consumer friendly mode of consumption, the Fordist fast food restaurant. Ritzer's, neo-Weberian, 'McDonaldisation' thesis challenges overly positive assessments of developments in contemporary consumer culture. He locates and systematically audits, the 'irrationality of rationality' exemplified by the process of McDonaldisation. "The principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world" (Ritzer 2000:1). Unpicking the 'dehumanizing' and 'destructive' consequences (Ritzer 2001: 33-44) of mass consumption, Ritzer highlights a dark side to 'consumer culture' only fleetingly acknowledged by the bulk of theorists.

Whilst Mort specifies his focus is 'on particular groups of men' (1996:145), he tends to over generalize from their specific experiences. Given the absence of attention to conflicting, and contradictory modes, practices and experiences of consumption, this is a significant weakness. Thus, he continually foregrounds the role of consumer culture in 'the expanding number of social identities offered to young men'. This 'expansion', he argues, is a result of the 'intensified scrutiny of subjectivity' (ibid.: 145) by commercial interests whose 'consumption scripts have shaped the interiority of experience' (ibid.: 205), of young male consumers. Clearly, Mort does recognise the power relations involved in consumption. He also recognises the continued importance of structural factors in shaping the experience of it (ibid.: 206). However, despite these critical checks, Mort's work still downplays the structural elements of continuity in the dynamics of capitalism. In particular, its contradictions, namely inequalities in class position, material and cultural power - and their social and psychic consequences - are largely ignored.

By contrast, Ritzer's work rejects unproblematic assertions of a qualitative break in the structure of capitalism. Rather, he argues, elements of both post-industrialisation and Fordism exist side by side. Whilst there has been a growth of 'knowledge workers', and there is a greater emphasis on 'complexity' in employment (Hage and Powers 1992:10), this is not the end of the story. Creativity and communication are more

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<sup>41</sup> I refer to the early 1980s and 1990s, the period of Mort's work, when the number of McDonald's restaurants expanded from around a dozen to 400 by 1991.

important at work, but such elements of 'complexification' characteristic of post-industrial society co-exist alongside 'simplification', or in short Fordism, though Ritzer terms it, 'McDonaldisation' (2000:182-183). I would argue, Ritzer's work provides an important corrective to Mort's. He argues, too uncritically, for a transformation in the role of consumption and consumer goods, which then affects the fabric of everyday life, and the shaping of identity. But, as Ritzer makes clear, the underlying premise for this claim, that the supposedly greater product variation associated with post-Fordism has led to a wider change in the patterns, meaning and outcomes of consumption is, at most, only partially correct. Thus, the post-Fordist thesis that, 'as post-Fordist workers become more differentiated, they themselves come to want more differentiated commodities' (Ritzer 2000:182) - fails to capture the 'complexity' of contemporary capitalism. I'd argue, along with Ritzer, that 'old-style Fordism' persists and that there has been no clear break from it (*ibid.*). Indeed in many sectors of the economy both workers' roles and consumers' demands remain wholly homogenized. Thus, many 'work routines are standardised' and even what workers say to customers is scripted. Finally, the needs of customers are frequently homogenised too, as in the case of fast food outlets, in order to meet the commercial imperative (*ibid.*).

Ritzer's focus on food, may question the applicability of his arguments to the clothing, footwear and cosmetics sectors, which are Mort's focus. However, Naomi Klein (2000), also documents contradictory developments in these sectors too. She argues that consumers are 'directly losing meaningful choices' (Klein *ibid.*:129), because of a combination of corporate mergers, synergy strategies, and a new wave of marketing through intensified and expanded, branding strategies (*ibid.*: 145-164). Thus Klein's assessment of trends in the fin-de-siecle retail milieu is again, at odds with Mort's. Whereas his focus is on new spaces for the creation and enactment of identity, particularly masculinity, her argument is that for young consumers, in particular, 'cloning' (*ibid.*: 129) results from the expanded reach of corporate brands into the High Street, from Gap to Niketown. 'The branded multinationals may talk diversity', but their actions produce 'an army of teen clones marching into the mall...market driven globalisation doesn't want diversity' (*ibid.*).

Like Ritzer, Klein contextualises the move towards more complex and stylised retail spaces as a significant, but contradictory, process which mixes elements of flexible specialisation with Fordism. The growth of the Starbucks coffee chain, she argues, is an example of a much wider dynamic. This pits selection above meaningful choice, via 'the combination of the big box and clustering approaches to retail' (ibid.: 140). Such choice, as there is, is constrained by the economic power wielded by the big players who dominate the markets for branded goods. Two things emerge from Klein's analysis, about which Mort and Nixon have little to say. Firstly, the big box approach is hardly post-Fordist. It is the old 'pile em high' and 'stack em cheap' discount store on a mega scale. The likes of Wal-Mart and its subsidiaries, such as ASDA, have 'hollowed out many a lively down town' in the US, by driving out smaller stores unable to aggressively discount and cut overheads through economies of scale, (ibid.: 130).

Secondly, there is the phenomena of retail 'clustering'. Clustering entails predatory competition by the big chains, who drop and seed many small retail units into city centres, e.g. coffee shop outlets such as Starbucks, which eat up the sales of other outlets, including their own,<sup>42</sup> forcing closure or take overs. All of this voracious market action works against consumer choice. It takes place within the wider frame of competitive price wars, which tend to favour the big brand chains. The overall outcome, according to Klein, is one which is far removed from the rosy picture of a seamless expansion of consumer choice, suggested by work premised on post-Fordism. Rather, whole sections of the population, the non-elite everyday consumer, largely ignored by Mort and Nixon, face the prospect of neighbourhoods, local and city centres, being 'blasted by the self-replicating clones' (ibid.: 140), and reshaped by market forces and economics over which they have no control.<sup>43</sup>

Again in contrast to Mort, Ritzer specifically focuses on the subjective ramifications of class based inequalities in power. He relates the alienation and dehumanisation of Mac-workers back to the 'quality' of experience consumers have, in the form of 'customer service'. For Ritzer, the resentment and alienation of employees who work 'Mac' production lines, exacerbated by the discipline of employment policies, in which 'scripted' customer service and personal cheeriness are obligatory, feeds back into the

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<sup>42</sup> Hence Klein's reference to cannibalization (ibid.: 136).

<sup>43</sup> And thus they live in locales bereft of smallscale independent businesses.



whole retail experience. Thus, I think, a combination of Klein's and Ritzer's arguments call into question the equation of contemporary consumption with increased choice, freedom and autonomy, something which Mort and Nixon, by contrast, uncritically infer.

As McRobbie argues, there are a number of problems with the 'gloss' (1994:37) put on consumerism by New Timers such as Mort. Whilst agreeing some young working class consumers can 'destabilise the fashion market' by utilising their consumer freedom - too many contradictions are overlooked. Analysis of the broader social relations of shopping is missing and needs attention. 'New Times' work on consumption, she explains, makes no mention of the reproductive work of consumption 'where shopping is domestic labour' (ibid.:32-33). Critical analysis, McRobbie points out, must focus, not only on the meanings of 'objects of consumption', but on the social relationships which entwine themselves around it, 'whether at work or in the home' (ibid.).

### **3.2 The commodity, product differentiation and brands**

Nixon's work in *Hard Looks* (1996) covers similar ground to Mort's, namely the discursive construction of new masculinities and, in particular, the constitution of 'new man'. But, he does this with a tighter theoretical focus on techniques of subjectivity, spectatorship and practices of the self. His work follows a parallel postmodern trajectory, but with a more explicit intellectual focus on, and take up, of Foucault's 'practices of the self' (ibid.:18), as a way of theorizing the creative performance of individuals through practices of consumption, such as grooming and dressing up.

Nixon presents a tidy synthesis of critical approaches. He begins with an overview of the impact of 'flexible specialisation' and moves on to review the role of, what he identifies as, 'post-Fordist' technical innovation, in e.g. the introduction of computerised EPOS stock control. He argues, these innovations in manufacturing, helped facilitate a greater emphasis on design, and a rapid variation in the production of fashion goods, and other commodities, via CAD and CCC<sup>44</sup>. Using in-depth interviews with menswear retail designers, advertising creatives, account planners and media

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<sup>44</sup> Nixon, S. (ibid.:26) CAD computer Aided Design and CCC computer aided cutting were technical innovations enabling faster turn around times from design, conception to realisation and 'mass' production.

buyers<sup>45</sup>, Nixon uncovers the detailed cultural fabric hidden in the broadbrush strokes of Featherstone's abstract meta-theorisation about the 'aestheticisation of everyday life' (1991). Clearly, some of the changes in the production of fashion items, in particular, are significant. But, Nixon and Mort fail to see that the overall picture with regard to the production of consumer goods is problematic, uneven and complex. In short both fail to appreciate, that as well as there being a clear element of change, to flexible 'post-Fordism', continuities and contradictions remain endemic to capitalism, its markets and social relations. As Hesmondhalgh puts it, for analysis of the cultural industries to be 'adequate' it must take account of 'continuity' and 'multiple and co-existing processes of change,' at different rates temporally. Thus their overemphasis on restructuring, 'exaggerates short term transformation' (Hesmondhalgh 2002: 97).

Focusing specifically on the question, what drives the proliferation of branding? (*cf* Goldman and Papsen 1998; Klein 2000; Williams 2000; Quart 2003; Lury 2004 and Ritzer 2004), provides a much needed corrective to the exaggerated accounts of heterogeneity in fashion commodities, found in both Mort and Nixon's 'post-Fordist' accounts. Defining brands, a phenomena substantially ignored in the formers' work (bar Lury's), 'as a name, logo, or symbol intended to distinguish a particular seller's offerings from those of competitors' (2004:181), Ritzer attributes the rise of branding to an old theme within Fordist mass production - the need for product differentiation. Manufacturers such as Nike, whose Far East 'sweatshops' churn out running shoes little different to their competitors<sup>46</sup> are, 'in the case of such mass produced non-things' (2004:179), faced with a major challenge. Thus the need to differentiate their 'mass produced non-things' from the mass produced non-things of others, and the drive to create difference, where little or none exists (*ibid.*).

Thus, for Ritzer, from Nike to Perrier (*ibid.*: 180), and from Evian to Coke's flop 'Dasanie' mineral water, it is the logo which supplies the symbolic meaning which puts the 'something' into the 'nothing' of contemporary consumer goods, not the imputed customisation of post-Fordist flexible production techniques. For Klein too, branding, has undergone a paradigmatic shift from being product and quality based to being about, 'not a product but a way of life' (Klein: 2000:23). However, like Ritzer, she

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*:54 *cf* the interviews with retail designers Mark Landini and Rasheid Din.

<sup>46</sup> 'Competitors' who they may also produce for.

argues, this transformation is best understood as part of the contradictory dynamics of increased concentrations of competitive corporate power. It is the conglomerates huge marketing budgets which facilitate the attempt to create diversity in names, and symbolic resonances. In terms of the actual 'lumpy objects' (ibid.: 199) themselves, however, there is very little to choose from. She argues, the most successful global corporations of the past two decades, Starbucks, The Gap, Ikea and The Body Shop, have all 'transformed the generic into the brand specific' (ibid.: 20).

Callinicos rightly argues, theorisation of capitalism as post-Fordist is wrong-footed. This is because the 'master concept' (1989:134) on which it is based, 'Fordism', is flawed, premised on an over estimation of the degree of homogenisation in the latter (Fordism), coupled to an underestimation of the degree of homogenisation in the former (post-Fordism). It is precisely because of the persistence of homogeneity, and standardization in the production of consumer goods, that there is such a focus on the creation of brand values and 'brand canopies' (Klein 200:148). Klein, draws our attention to the creation of brands as a key part of the production of 'corporate mythologies', which are powerful enough to infuse meaning into similar raw objects, 'just by signing a name' (ibid.: 22). Slogans like Nike's *just do it*, Goldman and Papson argue, aim to voluntaristically affirm an emotive and empowering philosophy of "hope and transcendence over alienation" (1998:94). But in doing this, brands also attempt to transcend their corporeally exploitative corporate bases. Thus, the attempt to conceal the contradictions and gaps between corporate image, and practice, provides the overall context of this study, of what brands mean to young people. As Goldman and Papson, tellingly argue, no matter how many commercials Nike runs on TV: 'there will still be haunting images of production practices in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Vietnam (ibid.: 184).'

### **3.3 Consumption: choice and its contradictions**

Another part of the backcloth to changes in young mens' consumption, of both commodities and images, according to Nixon (1996), concerns this shift in the nature of marketing practices. He argues, the 1980s saw a move away from ads based on USP<sup>47</sup>, creatively married to quantitative demographics, to ESP<sup>48</sup> based ads, married to

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<sup>47</sup> Unique Selling Proposition.

<sup>48</sup> Emotional Selling Point.

qualitative psychographics and VALS<sup>49</sup> segmentation. Thus, he contends, the critical focal point for the consumption/production loop was increasingly centred on selected consumers themselves, in the form of focus groups. Furthermore, culture he claims, was 'imbricated' in decision making, to such a degree, that it became difficult to tell economic and cultural decisions apart (1996:115).

What is striking about this unproblematic assessment of the role of economic forces in fashion, design and men's magazines, is that Nixon is unaware of other possibilities. Klein (2000:72) would surely see the psychographic focus group approach to marketing as a much more straightforward attempt at the corporate colonisation of the imagination, and culture, summarized in her concept of 'cool hunting' (ibid.: 68-76). Moreover, for a critic, who so explicitly uses Foucault, Nixon's engagement with his work is decidedly one-sided. His application of Foucault's work on 'technologies of the self' lacks balance, I would argue, through an elaboration of the dynamics of disciplinary power, which are being applied in the focus group approach to marketing, as part of the attempt to produce consuming subjects and their 'choices', (cf Rose 1999). This deficiency in Nixon and others take up of Foucault, is examined in more detail in **Chapter Two**. Despite briefly acknowledging the less stylish appearance of 'new lad', Nixon's work also remains resolutely focused on the positive potential, of both the 'new male consumer' (1996: 198) and men's consumption, based on 'stylepreneurialism' and Petri's *male to male* 'regime of looking' (ibid.:201). Whilst much that Nixon argues is plausible, for those with the most consumer power, his lack of analysis of contemporary consumption beyond the ranks of the style vanguard, is a serious weakness. Once again, much is said about the cultural consumption of the 90s style 'cognoscenti', but Nixon, like Mort, ignores the broader terrain, in which consumption is still framed for mass consumers and markets.

My research project, therefore, aims to focus specifically on the neglected experience of non-elite consumers, and what having to choose and make choices, as consumers, means to them. As Edwards (2000) argues, too much time has been spent on the creative consumer practices of elite groups, whilst Cultural Studies ignores the wider impact of neo-liberalism on consumption. In particular, the way that it can radically

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<sup>49</sup> VALS is a psychographic method of categorising consumers by their Values Attitudes and Lifestyles.

reduce rather than enhance has been overlooked. Seeking to redress this imbalance and expose the ‘contradictions of consumption’, he contextualises consumption, in the widest possible framework. Thus Edwards argues, given the incursion of the private sector into pensions, healthcare, housing and education, and, the literal spread of commodification through privatisation, it is anachronistic to consider consumer autonomy, freedom and power within the narrow frame of clothing, to cars, to moisturisers (2000:83). For Edwards the notion of consumer ‘choice’ is the key ideological ‘value’ (ibid.) of contemporary neo-liberalism<sup>50</sup> and it therefore deserves the closest critical scrutiny.

Choice in market societies shouldn’t be equated with a simplistic expansion of goods available, and an uncritical view of autonomy, as Nixon, Mort and others, infer. Rather, as Edwards contends, the action of market forces makes choice necessarily social - and contradictory. Thus the existence of demand at the right or sufficiently profitable price, (the criteria of supply for the manufacturer), arbitrarily removes choice for a whole range of goods and services.<sup>51</sup> Thus for Edwards, ‘paying for the right to choose’ undermines ‘universal state provision for the very poorest and for, those who cannot afford, do not know how, or have only very limited options, to choose’ (ibid.). Berating Featherstone (1991) Lury (1996) and Mort (1996) for ‘separating consumption from economic determination’ (Edwards 2000:92), he argues, such sumptuary policies, which hit the poor hardest, mean in de Certeau’s terms, some consumers always *have to make do more than others* (ibid.:101). Lodziak (2002), again, very much in opposition to Mort, Nixon and Lury, argues vociferously that propositions of ‘self assembly’ through consumption are erroneous. Firstly, because consumption, as we saw earlier, ‘rather than being an arena of freedom, constitutes a field of dependence by virtue of the alienation of labour’ (2002: 69). Secondly, Lodziak asks, if we are so free under so called ‘consumer-led’ consumption then why are we not free, to choose what is made? ‘Choosing from among’, he argues, is a poor substitute, ‘for deciding or choosing for oneself’ (ibid.: 2002:82). The make up of choice and the conditions of choosing, for consumers, form key parts of the discussion of agency in **Chapter Two**. The emotional dimensions of choosing and consuming brands are addressed in **Chapter Six**, especially.

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<sup>50</sup> I will return to ‘choice’ in **Chapter Four**.

<sup>51</sup> In the 1990s, so much paper was recycled, prices fell and many recycling companies went bust.

### 3.4 Consumption: ideological or material approaches?

Celia Lury's work in *Consumer Culture* (1996) is more circumspect, than Mort and Nixon's. She highlights a number of perspectives which are critical of 'consumer culture'. Bauman's early work on consumption, in which he describes consumer society as split between 'the seduced' and 'the repressed', is highlighted.<sup>52</sup> For Lury consumer culture is characterised above all by processes of 'stylisation' (1996:4) along the lines described by Featherstone. This is made possible, she argues, because consumption is an open ended process of conversion in which, echoing the cultural anthropologists discussed above, *cf* 1(1.1 to 1.3), 'the appropriation of an object' involves 'both a moment of consumption and production, of undoing and doing, of destruction and construction' (*ibid.*:1-3). It is, thus, 'always a cultural as well as an economic process' (*ibid.*:51).

Drawing attention to production led accounts of consumption, Lury infers, the demands of capital take precedence. In particular, the need to avoid economic stagnation drives the imperative to manufacture or create 'artificial needs', for ever more goods. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen's (1976) work on advertisers, 'as the captains of consciousness' who shape American consumer culture (Lury 1996:63-65), is important, as are the 'false needs' theses of Marcuse (1964) and Berger (1972). In contrast to Lodziak's materialism, Lury emphasizes, the ideological dimensions of consumption. She outlines Campbell's (1987) consumer led perspective which links the rise of consumption to 'imaginary pleasure' and the investiture of hopes, dreams and aspirations in objects. For Campbell, 'consumer hedonism' was a product of the historical transformation of the Protestant work ethic. Originally understood as a signifier of predestination and good faith, the work ethic laid the basis for a consumer ethic, through a romantically inspired devotion to the 'ideals' of good taste in objects and experiences. Thus the quest for pleasure, for each self, came to combine 'altruism' and 'self-interest' (Campbell *ibid.*:216-217).

Whereas Lury focuses on the ideological dimensions of getting consumers to consume, Lodziak attacks this approach, deriding Cultural Studies for its anti-materialism, which

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<sup>52</sup> 'The seduced', according to Bauman, are those free to make decisions about consumption, and to engage their desires by, 'acquiring and displaying commodities'. 'The repressed' are those for whom access is denied due to a lack of 'economic and cultural resources' (Lury 1997:43).

he labels 'an ideology of consumerism' (Lodziak 2002:1). According to Lodziak, our investment in commodities is much more about material conditions, than ideological persuasion. It is not the seductions of advertising which 'compel us to consume' (ibid.: 89-94). Rather, it is the fact that we have no choice, having lost control of the means of production.

The passive and massified consumer required by capitalist production... is not created by capitalism *altogether* by means of advertising, fashion and 'human relations'... on the contrary, capitalism already creates him within the relationships of production and the work situation by cutting off the producer from his product. (ibid.: 92) [my emphasis]

However, Lodziak's critique of Lury, Mort and Featherstone, develops in an increasingly contradictory and erratic manner. He insists it is not just that Cultural Studies has overstressed the role of ideology in consumption, through a focus on the influence of the cultural industries. It is guilty too of simultaneously watering down ideology, as a concept. He argues that Cultural Studies gradually gave up the 'dominant ideology thesis altogether' and instead, 'embraced the postmodern view' of a range of 'competing ideologies which individuals use selectively, to make sense of their own lives (ibid.:16). The question of how the role of ideology is to be theorised, in relation to the construction of consumers' consciousness and practices, is crucial. But, Lodziak is not at all clear on how to do this and, in particular, his critique of Cultural Studies doesn't move beyond a dichotomous view of consumption as *either* being about material needs *or* ideological manipulation.

Lury (op. cit.) concurs, albeit critically, with postmodern perspectives on consumption. She points to the concept of the 'stylization' of consumption, as having proved its critical worth (if somewhat differentially), to her discussions of consumption in relation to 'class, gender, race, class and age'. She concludes, 'consumer culture provides an important context for the development of novel relationships of individual self-assembly *and* group membership' (Lury 1997:256). Despite the subtle nuances of her arguments, and the recognition of the persistence of class, gender, race and age as 'social groupings', she doesn't fundamentally part company with Mort and Nixon. Foregrounding 'individual modes of assembly' (ibid.) means her perspective stays within the postmodern purview.

## 4. Conclusion

In this chapter, part one reviewed key approaches to the commodity, the consumer and the relationship between the two. I argued, that the commodity was characterised by a duality, first noted by Marx, who insisted on its potential to satisfy both needs and desires. Thus far, primarily it has been cultural anthropologists who have developed our understanding of commodities, as meaningful objects. From Appadurai to Miller, economic rationalism, individualism, and instrumentalism, have been decisively rejected, as has what Slater (1997) has called the ‘amoralism’ and blackboxing of classical liberal economics, vis-à-vis its silence as to the origins and meaning of needs, and, as to the reasons why, and how, we consume as we do.

Part two, introduced sociological arguments about social and positional consumption, via the work of Veblen and Simmel. The links between consumption, status and power were developed by outlining Bourdieu’s work on taste as a ‘classifier’ of class, and as a part of social reproduction. I outlined the key weaknesses, and gaps, in contemporary literature: **i)** An overemphasis on the consumption of style elites; **ii)** a far too uncritical use of the concept of post-Fordism and an inadequate critique of contemporary capitalism; **iii)** an overly symbolic and materially disembodied view of the relationship between consumption and identity; **iv)** an insufficient account of subjective experience and analysis of how individuals are formed in relation to consumption, and **v)**, the gap between textually based analyses of the meaning of consumption and empirical research. I then critically outlined, the two overarching perspectives on consumption, in Cultural Studies, Structuralism and Culturalism. Critically addressing accusations that Cultural Studies’ work on consumption had collapsed into subjectivism and ‘cultural populism’, I argued, although there were significant grounds for criticism, the points made against Culturalists often amounted to caricature.

Part three, brought contemporary Culturalist accounts of consumption into dialogue with its detractors, with these outcomes. Firstly, with regard to **product differentiation**, there is, I think, a glaring absence of consideration of the place of the brand in work influenced by post-Fordist theory, notably that of Featherstone (1991), Nixon (1996) and Mort (1996). Instead of celebrating the choice of personal consumables and their use as ‘technologies of the self’, I have stressed the need for

critical circumspection. Thus, I have presented a detailed critique of the post-Fordist paradigm, using Klein (2000), Edwards (2000) and Ritzer (2000, 2001 and 2004), applying the latter's very useful 'something and nothing' axes of analysis, to brands. In relation to Nixon and Mort's work, I argued, a one dimensional approach to choice emerges. This equates it with more consumer goods, being available for some. Edwards (op. cit.) was used to argue choice in markets has uneven and contradictory effects. An increase in availability for some consumers means a decrease in options for others. Similarly, Ritzer's linking of the subjective condition of the consumer to the worker, brought to the fore the contradictory dynamic between decreased autonomy for workers, and an apparent increase in autonomy for consumers. Rose (1999) was introduced to develop the debate and to highlight the one sided take on Foucault, which Nixon adopts. His stress on the 'technologies of the self', available to some consumers, neglects the countervailing disciplinary power of 'techniques of subjectification' as applied to consumers, through market research techniques.

Finally, bringing the opposed perspectives of Lury (1997) and Lodziak (2002) into dialogue, revealed the need to engage both the material and ideological/symbolic dimensions of consumption. Whilst Lodziak makes a salient point about the 'dematerialisation of consumption', there are glaring absences in his arguments. He offers no means with which to address ordinary people's subjective experience of consumption, or to examine the wider social and psychic ramifications of being addressed as a consumer. This together, with the degree of choice exercised in consumption, is addressed in detail in **Chapters Two and Three** and in the chapters of analysis which follow.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Consumption, subjectification and subjectivity**

# 1. Subjectification

## Subjectification and its limitations

My research centres on the relationship between young people's consumption of brands and their sense of identity. The extent to which consumption is an enabling *and* constraining activity, with regard to personal<sup>53</sup> and social identity<sup>54</sup> is a crucial one. The previous chapter argued consumption had a cultural expressive and social positional role. It was suggested that young people, are not straightforwardly the objects of consumption. They are not irredeemably bound into the discourse or ideological address of the marketing and other cultural industries, nor are they sovereign consuming subjects. Instead, as Hall suggests, as with any cultural practice, the key task is to maintain objectivism and subjectivism, in 'productive tension' (Hall 1980a), and to attempt to further detail their interplay. Here this means examining the consumption identity dynamic more closely so as to specify both its enabling and constraining dimensions.

Giddens expresses this tension with great acuity, when he describes the experience of self identity in global neo-liberal modernity as a struggle, a 'tribulation' or 'dilemma', between, 'a personalised versus commodified experience of the self' (Giddens 1991:196). My focus, therefore, is on how this dilemma is lived, how young people negotiate the classifications of the consumer provided in marketing and popular media discourses, and how they relate to these attempts at subjectification or ideological interpellation. In short, how young people occupy the space of the consuming self. This section, therefore, outlines the possible contribution of a number of overarching paradigms, which attempt to delineate the relationship between the individual and the social, and between subject and structure, with the question of agency continually coming to the fore. I will therefore critically examine, in concert, Foucauldian approaches to understanding the subject in the social world, and in consumption more specifically, alongside the role assigned to the subject in structuration<sup>55</sup> theories. At the

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<sup>53</sup> Woodward, K. collective and personal identities 'clearly overlap' (2002: pxi).

<sup>54</sup> By social identity, I am referring to the research participants' experience of categorisations and concepts of group identity such as gender, race and class. By the term self-identity I am referring to how research participants may construct, and see themselves, as particular distinct individuals, potentially but not necessarily involving the three aspects (and more) of social identity, and their particular combination.

<sup>55</sup> Parker, J. following Giddens (1976), gives two accounts of the term structuration one, in the lower case, as any dynamic process, or relations, between parts whereby a structure comes into being, whether

same time psychological and psychoanalytical approaches, to the subject will also be discussed. Critical Psychology will be dealt with in the concluding section.

Foucault has rightly relativised, and historicised, the particular versions of the self which have made up the shifting discursive constellations of knowledge that have defined the constitution of the Western subject. In *The History of Sexuality* (1979), he produces a detailed excavation of the development of modes of subjectivity, or ways of thinking the self, which are encapsulated in a range of practices, including discursive knowledge systems. It is through these discourses of self-knowledge, he argues, that we come to know or understand ourselves, as selves. Thus the people of Ancient Greece and Rome were encouraged to think of themselves as subjects, in relation to their sexual conduct. The discourse of sexuality became a key focus, (as it remains today - albeit with significant changes), for their sense of self-identity, in terms of self-consciousness, or as a 'conscience of self-knowledge' (Foucault 1982 quoted in Smart 2002: 107). Based on this work, Foucault outlined the mode of subjectification<sup>56</sup> or 'subjectivation' (Foucault 1987) as the way that subjectivity is socially framed as, 'the forms and methods... of the relationship to self by which the individual is formed and recognizes himself as a subject' (ibid.: 1987:29).

Rose has taken Foucault's genealogy of the Western subject and updated it, applying his concept of the 'mode of subjectivation', to create a wide ranging study of the twentieth century Western self. Across a plethora of decisive sites for the operation of power knowledges<sup>57</sup>, he examines, a range of discursive practices institutionalized in three key fields of human subjectivisation, or subjectification (Rose 1999: 264-265). Offering a detailed analytical survey of the management of subjectivity in Britain,

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a cake or a class structure. The other use, with a capital 'S', by contrast, denotes a much more specific meaning in relation to social science/ theory. It refers to the theoretical contribution made by Giddens (1984), and subsequent followers and detractors, who assess the role of human agents or agency in explaining the origins and existence/persistence of social structure by either overcoming the dualism in social science between subjectivism and objectivism - structuration as a singular duality, or by reinstating the duality of subject and object, as in the case of post-structurationist theory (2000:6-7).

<sup>56</sup> 'Mode of subjectification', draws on Foucault's work on the construction of forms of subjectivity or self-identity through discursive practices, and institutions, which are appropriate to, or in harmony with, the broader operation or management of societies, in terms of their economic and political relations and systems.

<sup>57</sup> In Foucault's work 'power-knowledge' is any body of language, and attendant practices, which when presented as explanations or theories make veridical claims to 'truth', but whose authority lies not in their explanatory purchase, on an extra discursive condition of reality, and their appeal to this. It lies with their power to define a particular version of 'reality'. Hence, 'truth regimes' not 'truth'.

involving the people at war, at work and in their experience of childhood and the family (ibid.), Rose traces the trajectory of changing concepts of the self. He argues these have won authority and legitimation because of their usefulness to government, as the means with which to 'render'<sup>58</sup> populations manageable.

Rose uses the term 'rendered' on many occasions. It is pivotal theoretically, suggesting a process of making tangible, aspects of previously intangible subjective experience. It is psychological and other experts, who make available to the wider public the necessary concepts, words and vocabularies, which allow access to key aspects of our inner self-experience. In one striking example, Rose argues, the development of psychological knowledge as a legitimate 'regime of truth'<sup>59</sup> was tied to the state's and, in particular, the army's need to manage the British people, in World War One. Psychology established itself then, as an officially sanctioned science through its use as an expert system of knowledge, aided by mathematical/statistical techniques. For Rose, Psychology was legitimised as an 'expert knowledge' by transforming the British Army, from an anonymous mass, into a manageable form. This was achieved by developing a system of easily readable personnel files, in which coloured celluloid tabs' indexed 'intelligence tests' (1999:19). 'Psy-knowledge', as Rose calls it, provided the conceptual furniture which 'rendered' subjects knowable and visible as words, numbers and points on graphs. It provided the scales, measuring devices and systems of evaluation, to assess whether soldiers were fit 'subjects' for the Army. Today, he argues, the mode of subjectification has shifted. The private self is now rendered a choosing consuming self, as individuals are asked to become 'entrepreneurs of themselves', shaping their own lives through their choices (ibid.:230). Rather than being governed by coercive intervention in personal conduct, as with the military subject, 'types of lifestyles are on offer' so that forms of conduct are now governed through 'a personal labour to assemble a way of life within the sphere of consumption' (ibid.: 231).

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<sup>58</sup> Rose (ibid.: 1999:150, 122 and 239). Cf his use of 'rendering' in the context of the development of child psychology, where the enormous complexities of children's engagement with the world around them are rendered visible. They are made tangible, by the 'developmental' psychologist, through photos, illustrations, tables and graphs, which serve to 'measure development', or the lack of it. 'Rendering' is, thus, for Rose, a key part of the management of subjectivity.

<sup>59</sup> 'Regime of truth' refers to Foucault's rejection of any one explanation's supposed veridical superiority over another. What is at stake is the ability of competing discourses to aggregate to themselves the institutional power to dominate social thought and control definitions of the social world, rather than access to universal extra-discursive truth.

Despite the coherence of Rose's argument, that 'psy' knowledge provided the military authorities with the means to think, categorise and administer the military subject, I detect a problem in his conceptualization of the 'rendering' of subjectivity. This is Rose's subtle effacement of the question of agency, and its dynamics, as grappled with in Structuration (Giddens 1984) and post-Structurationist<sup>60</sup> social theory. This elision is manifest in his work linguistically. Thus the adjective 'rendered', in the context of its cumulative deployment in his analysis, alongside a range of synonyms, effects a glossing over of the complexities involved in attempting to turn soldiers into military subjects.

Whilst it's plausible that the army would have benefited from the provision of such a system of 'bio power'<sup>61</sup>, with which to classify its men and women as subjects, and that these discourses and practices would have some effect on soldiers own subjectivities, there is a snag. Rose's account here, and elsewhere, infers little psychic space for the capacity of men and women to not fit in, to not identify, to resist and to negotiate, and in short to 'do subjectivity differently'<sup>62</sup> at odds with the 'psy' informed schemas of the management of military subjectivity. Later in this Chapter, and in the next, I will introduce the work of Billig (1988); Gramsci (1971), Voloshinov (1926) and Vygotsky (1978), who challenge the abstract discursive cognitivism, Rose, at times echoes. Though his work contributes to the understanding of attempts to create 'subject positions,' whether of soldiers or consumers, it does not adequately address the question of how and why these are or are not negotiated, and lived, or taken up. This is because Rose's work doesn't sufficiently examine, specify and elaborate on the nature of subjectivity and particularly the potential for subjective agency through, for example, resistance to the form of subject, or the subject position, to which the individual is called or hailed<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> Cf, Archer M, S. *Human agency and social structure: a critique of Giddens* in Clark, J. Modgil, C. and Modgil, S (eds) (1990) and Mouzelis, N. (1990).

<sup>61</sup> Foucault's term for the technologies with which to survey, manage and administer populations, from population census, to regulatory classifications of disease.

<sup>62</sup> Skeggs, B. Describes how the women in her study, demonstrated elements of self regulation, broadly in keeping with Rose's and Foucault's arguments, but significantly also, 'few of the self mastery and self care elements previously assumed' (1997:164).

<sup>63</sup> Althusser L, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: notes towards an investigation' in *Lenin and Philosophy* (1971) For Althusser the term, 'hailed', indicates how we are addressed as subjects through language 'hey *you*' and how, in answering such a call, we are positioned as subjects. He, too, lacked the theoretical means to explain the lack of fit between the subject, as called, and the subject who might

Giddens' argument with regard to agency and consumption, though having its weaknesses, is important here. He argues, in a manner similar to Rose, 'individualism becomes extended to the sphere of consumption' to the point where, 'market governed freedom of individual choice becomes an *enveloping* framework of individual expression' (1991: 197). But Giddens recognises such enveloping of the self is neither smooth, nor complete. On the contrary, 'commodification' does not prevail unopposed, individually or collectively. 'Even the most oppressed of individuals – perhaps in some ways particularly the most oppressed of individuals, react creatively and interpretatively to processes of commodification which impinge on their lives' (ibid.:199). This gap in Rose's work - centred on the ability to do subjectivity differently - demonstrates the need to address, more specifically, the dynamics of agency and subjectivity, through consumption and to specify how human subjects might be 'positioned socially'. As Frosh argues, the challenge is 'to reveal how the terms of the traditional individual social divide actually interpenetrate each other' (1999:15).

Despite these deficiencies Rose does historicise the development of particular ways of thinking and 'rendering' selfhood. It is only through the action of a variety of sometimes competing forms of psychological knowledge, as 'veridical discourses'<sup>64</sup>, that our experience and our sense of ourselves, is knowable, he argues. In his perspective, the self is always mediated by 'variable' modes of subjectivity which condition and shape our most intimate sense of ourselves, as individuals with inner beings. 'Psy knowledge', by providing the means to 'render' ourselves visible, as subjects, through theoretical constructs, concepts and languages, produces the paradoxical effect that our sense of ourselves and of our self-identity depends on them. As Rose puts it, 'the self does not pre-exist the forms of its social recognition; it is a heterogeneous and shifting resultant of the social expectations targeted upon it.' Thus, the importance of his contention, that our subjectivity is *never our own*, in any unmediated, essential and intimate sense (Rose 1998: 222).

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respond, reducing subjectivity therefore to what he termed 'interpellation' or the fixing of subjects within dominant ideological/ symbolic structures.

<sup>64</sup> Veridical discourses are in Foucauldian terms those arguments, concepts and theoretical vocabularies which lay claim to reality, descriptively and analytically. For Foucault, such 'truth, as they have, amounts to their action as power knowledges. This means veridical discourses, are those which have been able to gain (win) the institutional authority to define what becomes accepted reality.

## 1.2 Functional subjects or troublesome agents?

Rose's examination of 'the productive subject' (ibid.: 55-60), brings the gaps in his arguments to the fore. Why is it that only 'Psy' and other power knowledges can shape our most intimate sense of ourselves? Vygotsky and Leont'ev (1978 [1975]), as we will see later, argue ideas emerge from an engagement with socially mediated activity, 'consciousness is located not in the head but in activity' (Nardi 1996 in James and Bloomer: 2001:3). Rose, I think, downplays the potential for activity and knowledge, outside the discourses of official expertise, to shape the sense of the self and the role of embodied experience in shaping perceptions too. He tends to circumscribe the capacity for agency, both discursively and extra-discursively, within the frame of 'Psy' and other sanctioned discourses. Thus, he tilts towards a version of structural functionalism in which there's a near perfect fit, or equilibrium, between changing modes of subjectification, actual subjectivities themselves and systemic needs, whether in factories, offices or beyond.

With regard to the use of 'Psy' and other expertise to manage employees and to formulate 'human resource' strategies, through 'human technologies' and 'techniques of the self', Rose argues, these are, 'key elements in the fabrication of new languages and techniques which *bind* the worker into the productive life of society' (Rose 1999:60 *my emphasis*). Yet the historical periods, he chooses, for his overview of attempts to manage the subjectivity of the people at work, the interwar, Second World War and post-World War Two decades, saw the development of powerful forms of 'shop-floor' unrest, and rank and file militancy. These decades, in fact, saw a proliferation of 'wildcat' strikes and unofficial stoppages, and the growth of the shop stewards movement.<sup>65</sup> Rose tends to preclude the possibility of the development of these kinds of counter oppositional modes of subjectivity, which involve, in Gramscian terms, unofficial or 'contradictory consciousness' (Gramsci 1971:333). Such counter or contradictory modes of subjectivity originating beyond his favoured source, expert scientific discourses, can 'mobilise' workers under the banner of more organically sourced knowledge, through traditions of class solidarity, collective trade union struggle and consciousness.

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. Callinicos, A. (1995:27-40) for accounts of the 1930's revival of working class militancy, wartime strikes in engineering and in the post war period, especially in the 1960's and early to mid 1970's. These have been characterized as '*do it yourself reformism*'

The problem here is not that agency is completely written out of Rose's approach, rather it is individualised and downplayed. His work with Miller (1997) is strongly critical of those who see consumers 'as passive automatons to be manipulated and equipped with false needs' (Miller and Rose 1997:1-36). However, both in terms of ideas and actions, and their conditions of possibility - agency remains unelaborated on. It exists as little more than an inference, the space of a disembodied and abstract intervention. The concept of subjectification in Rose's work (1999:264-265) is so broad that it's overloaded and made to do the work of 'dualism' in structuration theory. Subjectification, ultimately I think, conceals more than it reveals. It sidesteps the devilish detail of what exactly happens when, for example, market researchers at the Tavistock institute work to 'render' the subjects of chocolate or beer consumption (Miller and Rose 1997: 10-11 and 19-20) and it says little about how subsequent really existing people think, behave and feel, when they consume.

More fundamentally, Rose's work with Miller, demonstrates an unresolved tension between a more straightforwardly disciplined and managed version of consumer subjectivity, and one much more in keeping with their preferred notion. This is a subtle, intricate, relationship between the individual consumer and product. Miller and Rose argue, this involves carefully putting together, 'a complex and hybrid assemblage' (ibid.: 1997:30), in which, 'forces and flows imagined to issue from within the psyche of persons', are 'linked up to possibilities and promises that might be discerned within particular commodities' (ibid.). This tension in their conceptualisation of the subject is inherited from Foucault, who was caught between the structuralism of his early work, and the post-structuralism of his later writings.

If one wants to analyse the genealogy of the subject in Western Civilisation, one has to take into account not only techniques of domination, but also techniques of the self. One has to show the interaction between these two types of the self (Foucault and Sennet in Rieff ed 1982:10).

Best and Kellner argue, this tension remained unresolved in his work. Foucault did not 'adequately mediate the shift from technologies of domination to technologies of the self', and he failed to accomplish the task he set himself of showing the interaction 'between these two types of the self, between the constituted and constituting self' (Best and Kellner 1991:67). I think this criticism also applies to Rose.

### 1.3 Structuration vs. subjectification

Turning to consider Giddens' structuration theory, by contrast, and not unproblematically, he explicitly addresses the role of agents in social systems, such as consumption, as both constituted and constituting. Giddens' argues, 'Structuration' theory resolves the antithesis in social thought between subjectivism and objectivism, 'the dualism of agency and structure' (Giddens 1981:30). 'Structuration', he argues, resists both the tendency to reify structures, as in Structuralism, or to fetishise the autonomous freedom of action of subjects, as in hermeneutics, action theories or in the kind of postmodern Culturalist accounts of consumption, dealt with above.

Whilst the latter paradigms' strength is in their detailed focus on human conduct as intentional action, this emphasis comes at the price of their inattentiveness to 'structural explanation or social causation', according to Giddens (1979:49 quoted in Callinicos 1985:136). 'Action theory', he argues, is 'strong on actions, weak on institutions' (Giddens quoted in May 1996:105). By contrast, the emphasis on structures and social systems, in Structuralism and Functionalism, reduces human agents to mere 'bearers of structures' or functions of systems. Giddens attacks both 'Althusserian Marxism and Parsonian sociology' because, 'the reproduction of society occurs "behind the backs" of the agents whose conduct constitutes that society' (Giddens 1979:49 quoted in Callinicos *ibid.*). Recognising the value and limitations of each of these theoretical poles of attraction, Structuration theory, he argues, synthesises the concept of society and culture as 'praxis', the outcome of human activity. It is activity, this action in the world which constitutes human agency. Thus the concept of praxis, May argues, moves beyond the antithesis between freedom and determinism (May 1996.: *ibid.*).

To speak of human social activity as *Praxis* is to reject every conception of human being as 'determined objects' or as unambiguously 'free subjects'. All human action is carried on by *knowledgeable* agents who both construct the real world through their action, but whose action is also conditioned or constrained by the very world of their creation. (Giddens 1981:53-54 *my emphasis*)

By contrast, Rose's argument departs from Giddens' dialectical concept of culture as praxis. Rose, I would argue, places too much emphasis on the structuring power of modes of subjectivity derived from 'Psy' and other regimes of knowledge. Whilst rightly aiming to reconceive the conventional opposition between individual and

society, Rose effectively contradicts this by overestimating the power of official discourses. He tends to fill subjects up, to the brim, so that the space for any meaningful subjective reflexive agency is effaced or incorporated. These arguments about agency and incorporation are crucial for this research on branding, which, as Klein notes, aims to colonise or 'cool hunt' all creative agency and subjectivity (Klein 2000: 72-73). For Rose, our 'souls' are so governed under capitalism that we are 'obliged to be free' (1999:217), shaped by a mode of subjectivity which is congruent with the demands of the sphere of consumption.

The self is not merely enabled to choose, but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers, and its values. Individuals are expected to construe the course of their life as the outcome of such choices, and to account for their lives in terms of the reasons for those choices. (ibid.: 231.)

In the social conditions of the late twentieth century, the mode of subjectivity takes the particular form of proposing the inner being as, 'the autonomous subject of choice and self-realization' (Rose ibid.: xvii-xviii). Rose, therefore, rightly identifies the individual choosing consuming self as the subject which the discourses of neo-liberal capitalism wish to produce. But, I would ask, with what degree of success? Despite his denunciation of those who see consumers as automatons or dupes there is, I think, a strongish echo of structural functionalism in his work. He assigns agency to consumers, such as those at the Tavistock Institute, but at another level removes it, due to the excessive explanatory weight he attaches to 'Psy' and other expert discourses. This devaluation of experience and the space for agency of the subject is at variance with Giddens, whose work, within the parameters of structuration theory, attempts to calibrate the dialectics of agency and structure beyond the limitations of objectivism and subjectivism.

According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize. Structure is not external to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices, it is in a certain sense more 'internal' than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense. Structure is not to be equated with constraint but it is always enabling and constraining (1984:25).

Callinicos argues that Giddens' guiding tenet is, 'don't look for the functions social practices fulfil, look for the contradictions they embody' (Callinicos 1985: 136-137). It is this concern with the dilemmas and contradictions of consumption, and the

complexity of agency within it, which gives Giddens' work an 'anti-functional' edge. This allows him to develop a conceptualization of the experience of structures through 'practice', 'as enabling as well as constraining' (ibid.). It is just this dialectical sense which, I think, is absent from Rose's work. However, despite Giddens' checks against functionalism, his work does suffer from an over egging of individual agency and a tendency to hyper rational voluntarism (see my *emphasis* above). Thus, he too, inadequately engages with the multiple dimensions of social constraint, which circumscribe the possibilities for subjective reflexivity, including that exacted by the experience of class and its emotional or 'psychic economy' (Walkerdine Lucey and Melody 2001).

#### 1.4 Subjectification - beyond consumers as heroes *or* dupes?

Rose's theorization of subjectivity through subjectification, despite these criticisms, does make a contribution to critical work on consumption and, thus, to this study also. Firstly, it contributes to developing the critique of consumer choice and sovereignty, initiated in the previous chapter, which is premised on the myth of the bounded autonomous subject of liberal thought.

Secondly, in relation to the Structuration thesis, with its dualistic theorisation of agency, of both constituted and constituting selves, the Foucauldian work of Rose and others (*cf* Carter 1997) offers, as Slater points out, the alternative of *thinking past* the subject object dualism, inherent in configuring consumers as either 'heroes or dupes'. Slater argues, this dualism has restricted debate to the question, 'are consumers really free and autonomous or really manipulated?' (Slater 1997:59) The key to unlocking this impasse<sup>66</sup> in poststructuralist terms, he claims, is to understand that the government of modern peoples necessitates the production of 'freedom' in the specific form of selves who are autonomous, responsible, self-governing, choosing and managing subjects. Slater argues, '*freedom and power are not opposites*, but rather *freedom can operate as a very effective strategy of power*, a tool of power, a creation of power' (ibid.: *my emphasis*).

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<sup>66</sup> This kind of framing of the question of the degree of agency exercised by consumers is inadequate. The Structurationist approach despite its deficiencies, does stress and attempt to elaborate on the dynamics of consumption as a social practice and the consumer's role as agent within this.

However, it isn't clear how useful 'thinking past' really is when set against 'thinking through' the duality by attempting to specify the conditions and degree of agency, both material and ideological, involved in practices such as consumption. Rather than thinking past and abstractly resolving this theoretical impasse, the aim of this research is to see how young people negotiate it. My focus is, therefore, on how the invocation to choose is received, and how being hailed as a choosing consuming subject is experienced, and taken up, subjectively. It is on how the everyday dilemma of being caught between an increasingly commodified and personalised experience of the self, is negotiated and lived. It is this messy, contradictory and erratic texture of the lived experience of consumption, pace 'subjectivity' and, in particular, the conditions, material and embodied, and ideological and emotional, which shape it, that interest me. Therefore, I aim to examine the subjective work which takes place between subjects and techniques of subjectification<sup>67</sup> within the broader structures of neo-liberal capitalism. The work of Rose, Carter and others, though suggestive, ultimately cannot deal with these dynamics. Their analysis provides too bleak a vision of a self sealing social system in which pleasure and pain, resistance and submission, autonomy and power, are blunted, and fold back on themselves, to become part of a self-sustaining systemic logic.

### **1.5 Bourdieu - Symbolic mastery, the habitus and agency**

Finally in this section, analysing subjectivity is central to Bourdieu's project of unpacking the social significance of consumption. Bourdieu aims to 'understand the relationship between subjectivity, "as it is experienced and lived" and, "the 'objective' social world within which it is framed and towards the production and reproduction of which it contributes" (Jenkins 2002:25). He shares Foucault's and Rose's concern, to contextualise the self and to overcome the 'absurd opposition between individual and society' (Bourdieu 1990:31 quoted in Jenkins *ibid.*:18). However, beyond this broad similarity of purpose, a number of significant differences in theoretical orientation emerge, with regard to the relationship between subjects, subjectivity and consumption.

Whereas Foucauldian work is characterised by a diffuse notion of power, in which subjects play a productive part in their fabrication as particular kinds of consuming selves, and are thus much more than dominated 'automatons' (Miller and Rose

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<sup>67</sup> As Foucauldian analysis would describe it.

1997:30), Bourdieu offers a more circumspect account of the role of subjects in consumption. Like Rose, his concept of power is non-linear<sup>68</sup> and multidimensional. Bourdieu argues, power operates across a range of fields, from the artistic to the economic and political, through the amount of cultural, social as well as economic capital possessed. But unlike Rose, he argues that take up of positions in each field of power depends on the deployment and exchange of the forms of capital through which systemic class power is preserved by dominant classes and class fractions<sup>69</sup>. Despite the complexity of Bourdieu's model of fields and his assertive anti-economism and reductivism<sup>70</sup>, his explanation for the reproduction of the social order and boundaries of class society, is based on a far more centred, directed and hierarchical version of power. His focus on social reproduction leads some critics to argue, Bourdieu's account of human subjectivity is 'oversocialised' (Wrong quoted in Jenkins 2002:97), and unable to conceive of historical change, thus making it a 'sophisticated form of functionalism' (ibid.: 81-82).

These criticisms do have some relevance. For the moment, however, I want to examine some of the practices which Bourdieu identifies as central to the maintenance of class position, particularly with regard to my study of the consumption, since a dynamic of class power is absent from Rose's work. The concept of 'symbolic violence' (1977), he argues, involves the control of groups of people by non-physically coercive cultural means. In particular, 'symbolic violence' involves the application of a concept of Culture with a capital 'C', which contributes to the legitimisation of the power of one class over another. Education or 'pedagogic action' is, for Bourdieu, a particularly important agent of 'symbolic violence.' This is because though professing neutrality, in practice, education inculcates and imposes an arbitrary version of culture through aesthetics, values and classifications, which turn bourgeois culture into nature.

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<sup>68</sup> Rather than power operating in a linear flow from field to field, it is non-linear. His concept of 'homology' suggests, similarity, but not equivalence, between the structure of fields, when overlaid in terms of the distribution of forms of power. Changes in one field can produce effects in another. And 'affinities' between dominated class fractions may arise due to similarities in their position of subordination, within different fields of power, despite there being significant differences in the condition of each class fraction. Bourdieu, B. (2000[1993]:37-45).

<sup>69</sup> Class for Bourdieu is a relation involving power over others, but partly following Weber this power isn't restricted to possession of economic capital, but includes possession of cultural and social capital. 'Fractions' refer to competing sub-groups within the major classes who vie for power by determining the principle and practices of hierarchisation, and status distinction, in each field.

<sup>70</sup> Bourdieu argues correspondence between fields isn't reducible to linear causation - one field determining another. The idea that literature, in the field of cultural production, is determined by the class struggle or the economy, is a reductive feature of some Marxist work, notably Lukács's (ibid.:13).

Bourdieu described this process as ‘a particular type of symbolic mastery that is privileged by the dominant cultural arbitrary’ (Bourdieu 1977:50).

The results in **Chapter Four**, in particular, would make little sense outside of the operation of taste in brands, and the consumption of branded goods, as one of the key forms of ‘symbolic mastery’ in present neo-liberal conditions (Bourdieu 1998: 94-99), particularly amongst the young. That ‘symbolic violence’ (1977) and ‘collective misrecognition’ (Bourdieu 1993:81) - the acceptance of the values, relations and categories of class domination, across the fields of power as natural, by those whom they serve to oppress - are key conceptual formulations, says much about Bourdieu’s concerns. Unlike Rose, Bourdieu explicitly engages with the asymmetries of power perpetuated through the maintenance of class boundaries and domination, which are designed to protect the value of the capital of those who possess it, from those that don’t. Therefore, when it comes to the results chapters, his concepts can be easily grounded in young people’s experience of consuming brands.

Bourdieu’s account of the ‘cheating of a generation’<sup>71</sup> brings together these elements of ‘symbolic mastery’ and ‘misrecognition’ in his critical analysis. ‘Cheating’ takes place as part of the deployment of cultural and social capital, as the means to secure and resecure the positions of power enjoyed by the dominant classes and class fractions. In education, he describes, the continual battle fought to determine positions in the field of cultural power and to defend these positions by denigrating the value of grades, given the widening of access to Higher Education. What Bourdieu calls ‘diploma inflation’ (1986:161) can be seen with British exam results every August. His analysis of such exclusionary moves, designed to ‘cheat’ the many of the privileges enjoyed by the few, demonstrates the gulf between Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s work on subjectivity and power. Bourdieu therefore takes a much harder line on the dynamics of identity, culture and consumption, than the much lighter interplay of power relations suggested by Rose, Miller and Rose and Carter. Their analysis of consumption practices, suggests processes of ‘affiliation’ and the ‘alignment’ of consumers to products and is based on

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<sup>71</sup> Bourdieu P, (1986:143) describes the effects of ‘diploma inflation’ caused by a ‘mismatch’ between economy and education. Competitive class struggle, sees dominant fractions of the dominant class adapt, to keep ahead in the field, by ‘maintaining the scarcity and distinctiveness of their assets’ *cf* p161. ‘Reconversion strategies’ involve goal post moving or, ‘supplementing the official qualifications with the *real* social qualifications,’ (ibid.: 152) *my emphasis*.

the 'rendering' of 'needs' and desires. His is based on the dual oppressive role of 'distinction' in taste as an articulation of class power, through the application of 'symbolic violence' in the evaluation of choice in goods, and the adjudication of taste, and style, more generally.

The habitus which has proved a controversial part of Bourdieu's explanation of consumption also emerges in the results as an important means to analyse why, and how, some brands of clothing, footwear and accessories are consumed. Bourdieu argues, it is a key mechanism in the reproduction of classes. It also represents a way of resolving the structure agency duality, as neither a matter of individual autonomy nor subjugation, nor of a split between the mind and body. For Bourdieu the habitus represents the class structure *in the body*, subjectively inculcated and made incarnate.

The habitus is necessity internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application.... (1986:170).

Made up of sets of dispositions, whether of bodily gesture and posture; speech and manners; taste and ways of thinking, he describes it as 'a structured and structuring structure' and 'a system of schemes of perception and appreciation' which produce 'classifiable practices and works' (Bourdieu *ibid.*:171). It creates 'ontological complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:20) or the shared relationship to the world amongst those of the same class explaining their shared social orientation in the world. As the embodied form and outlook of social classes, and sub-classes, the habitus, therefore, represents an important interface between the material experience of the body, and the social structure of the world, something which is missing from the abstractions of Foucauldian analysis, as McNay (1999) usefully argues. At times in Foucauldian work, the 'self' appears little more than the space where the constant and remote dialectics of techniques of subjectification, render practices of the self, with little or no sense of why there should be any emotional investment in actions, thoughts and ways of being. Couldry (2000) contends that Rose's work on the history of forms of subjectification reduces subjects to the outcomes of 'historically shifting practices and technologies.' This is an 'astonishingly wide claim' (*ibid.*: 117), he suggests, not least because of the collapse of 'the space of the self – experiencing as a self, reflecting as a self, speaking as a self' (*ibid.*:121-122).

By contrast, Bourdieu's handling of the self, and the space for agency through the concept of the habitus, doesn't reduce the self to the social structure. The habitus doesn't determine everything that people think and do. Rather the possibilities the habitus disposes subjects to, when put into practice as actual thoughts, choices and actions exhibit a degree of uniqueness. His conceptualisation of the emergence of 'strategies' or 'practices' from the particular 'dispositions' which dispose subjects to take up specific 'positions', in the various fields of power, therefore allows a degree of agency. However, the habitus still frames subjective agency, through strategies, within materially and socially embodied constraints. As Wacquant explains, the strategies or moves made by individuals involve a mutual accommodation of habitus and field in which, 'it is the habitus itself that commands', the options. 'We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principals of these choices' (Wacquant 1989:45).

In Bourdieu's work a space for agency, or subjective possibility, clearly exists, albeit within the confines of the dispositions of a class habitus which embody the objective probabilities of class society. Simon Charlesworth's (2000) study of working class life, in Rotherham, after the Thatcher government's economic restructuring is instructive here. He surveys how the degradation of working people's social position with its limited probabilities is mirrored by their diminished sense of what is subjectively possible. This alignment of habitus and field, disposition and position, manifests itself in coping strategies which appear as 'self-willed ignorance' (2000:182). Charlesworth argues that such a state of 'ignorance' defends the self, from the psychological trauma which awaits, should the structural foreclosure of potential, circumscribing their lives, be faced head on. There is agency here, therefore, but these working class people act, think and make choices from within the constraints of a habitus which imparts a deeply embodied sense of what's possible for them, given the brutal context of what's probable. But why, and how, some working people do manage to get beyond being as 'everyday coping,' to develop 'forms of consciousness that make the world consciously problematic,' isn't addressed by Charlesworth (ibid.) or Bourdieu. As Jenkin's argues, 'it remains difficult to understand how, in Bourdieu's model of practice, actors or collectivities can intervene in their own history in any substantial fashion' (2002:83).

## **2. Subjects, subjectivity and agency**

### **2.1 Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Subjectivity**

What then of psychoanalytical approaches to the subject and in particular to the explanation of the dialectics of thought, consciousness and action, as aspects of the lived subjectivities which consumption and other practices both shape and are shaped by? Within the considerable gamut of psychoanalytical approaches, when it comes to understanding the self, a pattern emerges of either a tendency to ‘abstraction’, or to ‘biologism’ or biological essentialism, according to Frosh (1999: 238).

Abstraction refers to ‘social structural’ theories of the self, such as the Lacanian take on the social construction of the subject, in and through language (*cf* Frosh *ibid.*:138-152). This sees selfhood as constructed through a series of shifts in our, ‘insertion into the symbolic order of culture’ (*ibid.*:141). Approaches which are biologist are those which are committed to, and believe in, the primary role of ‘naturally’ occurring ‘essences’, ‘drives’ or ‘instincts’ in determining the identity and development, of organisms. Such a dichotomy certainly bears witness to the difficulty of specifying the interpenetration of the social and the individual, and it echoes the critical tensions within, and between, the work of Rose, Giddens and Bourdieu on the self, and its relationship to the social. In this section, I turn to focus in more detail on a discussion of conceptions of the subject and agency in the work of Judith Butler (1999 [1990], 1993), Slavoj Žižek (1989, 1994), and LS Vygotsky (1978 1986) and on contextualising the relevance of their work to consumption and its subjective dynamics.

### **2.2 Descartes’ thinking subject**

To contextualise the contribution they make to understanding the subject I want to briefly retrace the emergence of the split in psychoanalytical approaches, characterised by Frosh as ‘abstractionist’ or ‘biologist’. This is an important dichotomy, because as we have already seen, in the work of Bourdieu on class position and identity, in relation to consumption taste and choice, consumption is not simply a matter of cognitive reflexive thought and ideas. It can also be shaped by a much more deeply embodied set of culturally inculcated dispositions or habitus.

In terms of human identity, 'biologism', Butler argues, presupposes the existence of essential physically defined, and universally occurring, categories of sex and gender. It also argues these are organized in a congruent 'diamorphism', or binary opposition, between supposedly discrete and irreducible male and female sexes and masculine and feminine genders, respectively. Such categorisations, she claims, support the emergence of a matrix of identity. In this a normative paradigm of sexual desire, namely heterosexuality, becomes socially established as a 'naturalistic paradigm' establishing 'a casual continuity' between the triumvirate of, 'sex, gender and desire' (Butler 1999:30). Accordingly, for Butler, the internal coherence formed by the apparently seamless interconnectedness of sex, gender and desire, 'the old dream of symmetry', is the key to understanding its 'reifying' power. 'The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender and desire' (ibid.: 30-31).

For Butler the key source of biological essentialism, including the notion of fixed and dichotomised sex, gender and sexual identities, resides not in physical essence or attributes. Rather, it originates in the particular cultural construction of the body, which emerges alongside the notion of the unified self, the metaphysical subject of Western Enlightenment discourse. Thus it is the splitting of mind from body, in Descartes' 'cogito', which Butler identifies as the culpable source of biologism - the turning of the body into a detached instrument, there for the use of the mind. Thus in the very process of establishing a mythical unified presence, a self, a disembodied 'I', which 'thinks' and therefore 'is' existentially, Butler sees the mistaken and destructive belief in the concept of an essential self, or subject, in Western philosophy, being formed. What is of particular interest for my research on consumption here, is the importance Butler, like Rose, attaches to regulation as the means to secure, what she describes as, a 'compulsory' form of 'heterosexuality'. Before commenting further on her take on subjectivity, and subjectification, and its relevance to consuming brands, it is necessary to look at the detail of her arguments on gender identity.

### 2.3 de Beauvoir's Cartesian subject

Discussing the work of de Beauvoir, Butler highlights the complicity she demonstrates, with the, 'abstract masculine epistemological subject' (ibid.:16). For Butler, the foundation stone of Western philosophy, Descartes' method of reflexive doubt, is based on the mind body split. This instantiated a hierarchy in which physicality was denied, corporeality ignored and relegated, as the marks of embodiment became those of inferiority and woman. Butler argues that though de Beauvoir rightly saw gender as constructed, 'one is not born a woman, but rather one *becomes* one' (ibid.:28), she unproblematically reproduces the mind body split. Accordingly, de Beauvoir infers, there is an agent, in the being of '*becomes*', who makes instrumental use of the body, subjugating it in the manner of the Cartesian mind body split. Her approach therefore suffers from the very problem it seeks to remedy, according to Butler. By proposing '*the female body* as the situation and instrument of women's freedom' (ibid.:17), de Beauvoir succeeds, not only in reinstating the mind and body dichotomy, but ultimately, by instrumentalising the body she contributes to the very fixing of the essence of sex, that she ostensibly disavows. As Elliot puts it, 'de Beauvoir's feminism, ironically, reaffirms the ties between gender and anatomy' (2001: 116-117).

Thus de Beauvoir's attempt to culturally relativise gender falls back on, what Butler sees as, a metaphysics of substance. It is reliant on the concept of the self, as an agent, and on the mind body split. For Butler, this is an all too familiar story for feminist approaches to gender, 'reconciling the apparent need to formulate a politics which assumes the category of "women" with the demand, often politically articulated, to problematise the category, and interrogate its incoherence' (1993:188). Butler argues, it is not enough to relativise gender, culture goes all the way back to sex too, 'gender is not to culture as sex is to nature, gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or a "natural sex" is established as "prediscursive," prior to culture' (ibid.:11). However, her position clashes with the demand to maintain some kind of unitary identity, around the very concept of woman as a sex, which is driven by the political necessity for unity. Efforts to secure 'a common identity as the foundation for a feminist politics' (Butler 1999: xxix) thus close down the proper investigation of the construction and regulation of identity and of the category of sex per se, she argues.

## 2.4 Butler's Non subject *with agency*

It is at this point that we can review the importance of Butler's arguments in relation to the shaping of the subject and the exercise of subjective agency through consumption, as a mode of subjectification. Instead of seeing the social construction of gender as forms of identity and behaviour tied to pre-given sexed bodies, Butler, posits a Foucauldian type regulation of the outer performative conventions of gender. It is these which create the very sense of, an inner gendered, self. Thus, the cultural processes of gender performance, through customary routines and practices of dress, behaviour and language, are not the expression of any deeper ontological entity such as the sexed body, but of themselves only. For Butler, therefore, the body itself is socially constructed through the discursive, and material, accumulation of these cultural practices.

Thus, Butler contends, all gender is performative and this has important implications for her arguments about subjectivity and gender, as well as for the relationship between consumption and subjectivity. She argues, because the body does not come as a pre-existing ready made sex, 'it is no longer believable as the interior "truth" of dispositions and identity'. As she puts it, sex is a 'performatively enacted signification', which is not a 'to be' or 'being' as an existential self. Because of this, 'its release from a naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings' (1999:44). Therefore Butler tends to contradict Rose's position on the shaping of the private self. Whilst she too gives prominence to the regulative role of conventional practices and techniques of gender subjectification, this does not mean, she argues, that there is a neat fit or functional alignment, between attempts at gendered subjectification through official ideological discourse, and their take up as lived subjectivities. Butler argues, drag demonstrates both the prohibitive regulatory power of gender, and also the parodic possibilities of agency it affords through play with, and resistance to, the fixing of gender. The performativity of drag, therefore, exposes 'the dissonance between sex and gender' and, 'the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity' through regulatory power. 'In imitating gender,' she argues, 'drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency' (Butler 1999:175).

Yet within her scheme of resistance and parodic subjective activity, there is paradoxically no space for the agency - which she undoubtedly foregrounds - to reside within an agent, or a subject. In her account of parody as a challenge to the destructive terms of gender diamorphism, she proclaims, taking up Nietzsche, there is no “doer” behind the deed,’ ‘gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed’ (ibid.: 33). If we refer back to the criticisms made of Rose, we find that Butler clearly departs from the structural functionalist tendencies, he displays, in his analysis of the relationship of the subject to modes of subjectification, both discursive and extra-discursive. This is because of her commitment to practices which act against, and outside of, the dominant diamorphic binarism. However, paradoxically, she concurs with Rose’s poststructuralist denigration of the concept of the subject, as the agent who acts.<sup>72</sup>

One explanation of this apparent paradox, may be that for Butler, power, at the micro level in the Foucauldian sense, is productive of resistance as well as of repression and uniformity. But the problem remains, why should it be so for some ‘agents’, ‘actors’ or ‘doers’ and not others? Butler makes an important advance on Rose in her discussion of gender subjectification, by stressing the importance of action, performance and deed, as not necessarily officially governed in the way Rose tends to see them. Her arguments here, as to the performative nature of gender relations, and the power of subjective ironic challenges to them, are echoed in the results. In particular, this is so amongst the young women who use branded clothes to perform class inflected versions of respectable gendered identity. These seek to socially distance them from the threat of being classed as a declassed, sexualised other, or a promiscuous ‘skanky bird.’ Despite this important advance, Butler remains embroiled in the impasse around the question of the subject.

### **2.5 Žižek’s non essential subject as agent**

At this point we may fruitfully engage, Žižek’s work on ‘subjectivation’, with Butler’s work on gender and subjectivity. Whereas with Butler, there is agency but no subject, no ‘doer’ behind the deed, with Žižek there is both. For Žižek, as for Butler, the attempt to overcome the opposition between individual and society is central. Ideologies and discursive regimes are both ‘out there’, in an objective sense as discursive and material

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<sup>72</sup> She is also, as we have seen, tremendously critical of Cartesian rationalist self-reflexivity.

structures, and 'in here' psychically as subjective phenomena, but for Žižek, crucially, the two never quite cohere.

Instead, for Žižek, subjectivity is conceived as an absence, a gap or a lack. More specifically the subject is the space occupied between the Symbolic and the Real. Žižek strongly rejects what he sees as the usual poststructuralist striking out of the subject and elimination of the ontological and epistemological space, for 'a doer' behind 'the deed'. This is because that model of subjectivity conflates the social world which we inhabit, what Žižek calls the Symbolic Order, the order of words, concepts, ideas and their materialised structures, with the Real Order i.e. that which he takes to exist ontologically pre-discursively, the order which we as subjects strive to make sense of.

In 'post-structuralism', the subject is usually reduced to so called subjectivation, he is conceived as an effect of the fundamentally non-subjective process: the subject is always caught in, traversed by the pre-subjective process (of writing, of desire and so on). (Žižek ed 1989:174)

It is questioning and the sense making process which, he argues, makes us subjects and selves. This argument is crucial for my analysis of consumption. This is because, as Goldman and Papsan argued, despite all their signifiatory power, it is 'the gap between image and practice... between humanism and capitalism, between moral philosophy and the bottom line of corporate growth' (1999:184), which brands can never quite transcend. Brands are open to reflexive creative thinking, criticism and to creative and embodied adaptation and so, more generally, is the attempt to reduce all social interaction to consumer choice *cf* 5(5.1 to 5.7). Žižek therefore underscores my criticisms of Rose, both for his over filling of the subject with official power knowledge, as well as for his downplaying of agency and denigration of the self.

Rose's model of subjectification sees neo-liberalism through bio power, institutions and technologies, whether those of market research, advertising or government policy, deploying 'Psy' and other power knowledges, to seamlessly produce functioning consuming subjects. For Žižek, however, it is in the course of the search for meaning, between the Real and the Symbolic orders, that the capacity for a distinctive Self emerges. It is this striving for meaning, manifest in the subjective work of the imagination which, he argues, gives us access to 'our sense of reality'. This is never reducible to subjectification.

This search for meaning does not occur positively, because subjects are already such a rich interiority that they cannot find satisfaction with their representation. Rather, the subject always emerges from the negative, from the very failure of signification. As Žižek argues, ‘the subject of the signifier is precisely this lack, this impossibility of finding a signifier which would be its own: the failure of representation is precisely its condition’ (ibid.:175). Thus Žižek argues, post-structuralism mistakenly wipes out the subject and reduces it to the twin notions of ‘subjectivation’ or ‘subjectification’ and ‘subject positions’ (ibid.:174). It both *overestimates* the efficacy, and efficiency, of symbolic regimes of ideologies, discourses and practices to define the Real, and, *underestimates*, the fundamental contradictoriness of the Real itself. His take on Lacan, in opposition to the poststructuralist orthodoxy, reinstates the subject, but as ‘the negation of the negation’, as the mediating instance between two greater entities, the Symbolic and the Real. As Myers puts it, for Žižek, we are never reduced to mere manifestations of the Symbolic or to ‘automatons’ since:

we maintain our ability to integrate the elements of the Symbolic in an individual way and it is what Žižek terms ‘the Self’ that does this. In other words, the Self is what fills in the void of the subject, and while the subject never changes, the Self is open to constant revision. (Myers 2003:45)

For Žižek therefore, the subject should be seen as the space in which the self is produced. Hence, in his estimation, the process of subjecting ourselves to pre-existing symbolic systems, such as language, and all the other elements of the symbolic order, is never a closed loop - contra Marcuse et al. For Žižek subjectivation/ subjectification should be conceived as a more open and two way dialectical process. His work returns us in part, at least, to Giddens’ earlier formulations about praxis – understanding the self as both constituted and constituting. By defining the space psychically for the emergence of a non-essential self as agent, his work stands in contrast to Butler, who makes the break to agency but argues there is, ‘no doer behind the deed.’

## **2.6 Subjective work not belief machines**

For Žižek, moreover, it is ‘the cut’, ‘the incursion’ or the ‘irruption’ of the Real into the Symbolic, which makes difference and subjectivity possible, by inciting the negative subject to strive for meaning, and to mediate between the Symbolic and the Real. In Žižek’s account we know the Real exists and intrudes, or cuts into the symbolic, because, though we do not agree on the meaning of real things, we clearly dispute the

meaning of the same things and what the brute fact of the same things mean. For example diseases such as those which have become known as AIDS, according to Myers, 'mark an irruption of the Real' (ibid.: 2003:26). Meaningless within itself, the reality of AIDS can be found within the Symbolic Order. This is of considerable significance for Žižek because it is the existence of these particular takes on the world, which makes us real Selves and not just the effects of discourse, automatons or the non-subjects of subjectification.

Žižek, like Butler, stresses the importance of acts and performative routines of action. He conceives of ideology as more about *what we do* than *what we think*. Yet, the power of ideology, even when it's materialised institutionally in Althusserian like 'Apparatus' or 'belief machines' (1994:12-13), is never omnipotent. This is because our subjective work, what he terms 'fantasy', paradoxically, always ensures we make our own distinct cut into reality. Thus, for Žižek, fantasy and the work of our imaginations is not something to be patronised or condemned, it is a vital part of our ability to construct the meanings and understandings of ourselves, as real Selves. If the Real and the Symbolic were co-terminous there would be no subject, he argues.

The basic opposition between reality and imagination, fantasy is not simply on the side of Imagination; fantasy is, rather, the little piece of imagination by which we gain access to reality- the frame that guarantees our access to reality, our 'sense of reality' (when our fundamental fantasy is shattered, we experience 'loss of reality'). (Žižek in Wright and Wright eds 1999:122)

## **2.7 Vygotsky: semiotic mediation and agency**

Žižek's contention that the Real irrupts into the Symbolic, and that it is the struggle for meaning subjectively which make us subjects and selves, shares some common ground with Lev Vygotsky's take on the dialectical relationship between reality and consciousness. Vygotsky argues it is the continual interaction between actions, matter and mind, what has been called the 'mind in culture' approach, which shapes consciousness. Vygotsky's work grew out of a critical interest in both behavioural and developmental psychology. In order to break out of the reductivist approach of Stimulus Response (SR) research, he created a synthesis of behavioural and developmental work. He argued, SR, reified the terms of psychological research into discrete entities, subject and object, precisely in the manner of the false opposition which all of the above key theorists have objected to.

SR research, Vygotsky argued (*cf* Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner and Souberman 1978: 13-14), failed to account for the way human research subjects, and indeed subjects more generally, always change themselves, and the material and discursive conditions they occupy, both in the laboratory and outside it. The crude measuring of stimulus and response, went as far as actively ignoring the most important feature of human behaviour. According to Vygotsky, the initial warming up period constituted the most interesting part of experiments. It was at this point that active learning about, adjustment to, and striving beyond, the demands and parameters of the test task took place. Yet data on this was routinely binned, as the processes which mark out subjective orientation to, and mediation of, both situation and task, were deemed inconsequential. As Cole et al argue,

the individual actively modifies the stimulus situation as a part of the process of responding to it. It was the entire structure of this activity which produced the behaviour that Vygotsky attempted to denote by the term "mediating." (*ibid.*: 14)

Vygotsky saw language, discourse and knowledge, not as the management regimes or techniques, Rose primarily identified, but as the means for human agency. Human linguistic capacities were the key tools of symbolic mediation. These allowed, rather than precluded, self agency by facilitating the formation of a distinct conscious space of the self. Vygotsky's reaction to stimulus response approaches to problem solving studies, which conflated what children did when learning tasks with chimpanzees, stressed what was valid but also their severe limitations. Though such studies proved 'technical thinking' preceded speech, this didn't mean this dynamic always held, since the child's experience and activity changed the dynamics of development also. Mechanical explanations which postulated the independence of intelligent action from speech, were discounted by his analysis which, by contrast, suggested speech and practical thinking were integrated in the course of development' (1978: 22). He argued, 'mechanical conceptions' of child development through 'repetition' did not allow for 'the contribution speech makes to the development of a new structural organisation of practical activity' (*ibid.*). He attacked the universalizing and disembodied abstraction of stages in developmental psychology which, in a typically Cartesian manner, separated mind from body, privileging the former over the latter. Stern argued, that language acquisition occurred abstractly as an example of 'pure intellect' and that, "recognition

of the fact that verbal signs have meaning constitutes ‘the greatest discovery in the child’s life’ (ibid.:23).

Analysing observations of children in experimental situations Vygotsky gave a different explanation. This stressed the ‘dialectical unity’ of speech and actions (ibid.:24), as the key characteristic of human behaviour. Vygotsky, therefore, accorded, ‘symbolic activity a specific organizing function that penetrates the process of tool use and produces fundamentally new behaviour’ (ibid.). Moreover, consciousness, he argued, developed socially from the symbolic, thus the ‘turning inward’ of speech which was initially ‘turned outward’ by the child to accompany the pursuit of their actions. Finally, he argued, the initial address to adults and others around them eventually became an address to the self. The planning function of speech, ‘comes into being in addition to the already existing function of language to reflect the external world... Just as a mold gives shape to a substance, words can shape an activity into a structure’ (ibid.:28). This very limited introduction, shows why Vygotsky’s work is important to this research. Unlike the abstract approach to discourse of Rose, Vygotsky embodies thought, language and concepts and situates them reflexively, as a part of social material activity and lived experience, not apart from it.

The path from object to child and from child to object passes through another person. This complex human structure is the product of a developmental process deeply rooted in the links between the individual and social history. (ibid.: 30)

In practical terms we will see in the discourse and symbolic activity of the young people in the focus groups, who made up this study, the kind of subjective work between the Real and the Symbolic which Žižek suggests marks out the space of our subjectivity. In similar terms, Vygotsky suggests, the self is the site of an ongoing reflexive process between the symbolic and linguistic, and one’s own life experience or activity. The role of official discourse, whether those of the media, marketing or popular versions of ‘psy’ knowledge, in shaping the sense of the self, is important. But beyond the confines of these official or expert knowledges and ideologies, a range of individual and collective counter discourses, practices and dispositions can at times emerge to challenge the dominance of the consuming subject as the autonomous choosing self, as the results chapters show.

Furthermore, the invocation to choose and to be a consuming subject, which Rose (1999) rightly foregrounds, elicits ideological dilemmas (Billig 1988) and contradictory dispositions to the social world, materially and ideologically, rather than the functional shaping of a univalent self through subjectification, which Rose tends to suggest. As Holland et al (1998) argue, the role of linguistic signs as semiotic mediation allows human beings to 'escape enslavement' to the stimuli they encounter (1998: 35). Vygotsky's argument, which 'drew an analogy between tools and signs,' suggests 'that the use of signs altered not only the social environment but also the very behavioural architecture of the user' (ibid.). It remains indispensable to understanding the way young people think about, act with, and express themselves through, their consumption.

For Vygotsky the potential for symbolic reflexivity is the condition of human agency and subjectivity. But it is not a feature of bounded essential selves, but of unbounded and inessential selves, which are embodied and social. As Wetherell and Maybin argue, Vygotsky's model 'of continuing dialectical and transformative change in the social world' means the self is, 'continually in the process of being constructed' (1996:253). His work on semiotic mediation, as the means to agency, cautions us to be mindful of rejecting the cognitive, and reflexive per se, and of projecting these capacities too far back into the body as Bourdieu (1986) and Merleau Ponty ([1962] 1981) tend to do. Equally, his work opens up a critique of Giddens's emphasis on the role of individual knowledgeable agents which, tends to voluntaristically abstract reflexivity and agency from their embodied social conditions. By contrast, Vygotsky shows how thought, speech and action are always embodied through activity, and socially 'alloyed' (ibid.: 198:30).

### **3. Subjectivity**

#### **3.1 Interpretation, reflexivity *and its limits***

There is then, the previous section argued, a self, albeit a profoundly social and embodied self, which can experience, think about and act in the world. Such a self operates within material and discursive conditions, that can enable as well as constrain it, and in relation to which it is always in process. Thus, the self is social, non-essential and in a state of becoming rather than being.

Having established this much, I want to turn, in this final section, to discuss the specific elements which make up subjective experience and agency, and thus to look at the reflexive, interpretative and embodied dimensions of consumption. Through an analysis of the work of Žižek and Vygotsky, in particular, I have argued for the importance of the concept of reflexive thought. However, accepting that reflexivity is potentially a key dimension of subjective agency does not at all equate with a license to disavow the social, material and embodied constraints, as well as the very real emotional and 'psychic costs' of agency and transformation (Walkerdine et al 2001). Giddens, as I have suggested, tends towards such voluntarism and hyper rationalism, in his over emphasis on 'knowledgeable agents' (1981). In *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), he argues, increasing subjective self-reflexivity is the cornerstone of contemporary societies, lifestyles and identities. Drawing on examples such as the changing forms of long term partnership and marriage (Giddens *ibid.*:13), he claims, the self has become a project which involves increasingly intensive practices of self-monitoring, self-reflection and 'self-mastery' (*ibid.*: 9). Resisting pessimism about the impact on self-identity of this restructuring, he argues, expert research, analysis and knowledge about the finitude of contemporary marriages, has been actively taken on board by lay people who have 'positively' transformed their thoughts, and practices, with regard to long term relationships.<sup>73</sup>

Giddens has extended his work on reflexivity to the changing subjective experience of consumption. He argues, 'the consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of the self, and furthermore, appearance replaces essence as the visible signs of success' (*ibid.*: 198). His work here has fruitfully produced the formulation of the 'dilemma' between a 'personalised versus commodified' experience of the self (*ibid.*), which acts as a productive framework with which to discuss consuming brands, in relation to self-identity. However there are a number of weaknesses in his approach to this dilemma, and to the other tribulations of the self which shape our subjective life experience. A series of important questions need to be asked of his work generally and in relation to consumption. These include, to whom does agentic self reflexivity apply? What are the conditions of its possibility?

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<sup>73</sup> Thus, ordinary but reflexively informed people have reshaped their expectations of marriage, and long term relationships. Rather than experiencing the decline of 'till death us do part' marriages, as all loss and no gain, they are exploring innovative ways of relating to partners and step families etc (*ibid.*: 13).

and more broadly, how is the increasing focus on the self, as a bounded knowledgeable agent, to be critically assessed?

Giddens cautions, social deprivation may make 'self mastery' or modification such 'a burden' that it becomes 'a source of despair rather than self-enrichment' (ibid.: 82). However, despite this, his work on self-reflexivity is undermined by his emphasis on the socially disembodied knowledgeable rational agent. Such overplaying of self-agency through social practices, such as consumption, makes his explanation vulnerable to the criticism made of one of his key psychological influences, Erikson. Thus for Frosh, Erikson's earlier work on subjective cultural adaptation, a key influence on Giddens' concept of 'Self-Identity' as reflexive life project, is marked by a concern with society which 'drifts into a legitimation of it' (1999:92). With regard to Giddens' voluntarism, I think Elliot is right to criticize, 'the almost excessive emphasis that Giddens places on the tacit knowledge and self understanding of social agents'. Such an emphasis, as Elliot puts it, 'threatens to break the link with issues of social power and political domination' (Elliot 2001:41). As Skeggs reminds us, contra Giddens, the reflexive self is a thoroughly classed concept with a 'class resource' based 'nature' (2004:34).

What has been defined as the condition of (post)modernity – that is the reflexive self – is a very specific class formation, strongly resisted by those who are put under constant scrutiny and forced to tell in ways not of their own making. (ibid.)

Giddens also tends to situate change, between subject and system, in terms of the alignment of the former to the latter. Large scale changes, especially political and economic restructuring, foster small scale change and adaptations. In my view, this approach is too functional. In a manner similar to Rose, he ignores the role of unofficial oppositional movements, ideologies and practices which lie outside his official terms of reference. Empirically his work surveys 1980s Britain, yet he omits to mention the role of counter cultural movements, the impact of Acid House, Rave and 'Ecstasy' sub, and club, culture. He is also silent about the broader social influence of oppositional political movements, such as the Greenham Common women and Anti-Roads protests; alternative lifestyle currents such as the New Age movement, and mass strikes, such as the Miners' Strike. Thus, he fails to consider the role these might also play in reshaping consciousness and concepts of self - outside both the official and consumer nexus.

### **3.2 Cognition and dilemmatic thinking**

When it comes to consideration of the part thought, and in particular organised schemes of thought, ideologies and regimes of knowledge may play in shaping young peoples' relationship with brands, I think it will be useful to break from the kind of imperious management of consciousness Rose, at times, suggests in the case of consumers, strikers and soldiers. To do this, the work of Michael Billig (1988) provides an important corrective to overly schematic ideological analysis. Billig contends, 'cognitive theories which are based too one sidedly on the singular processes of categorisation, miss out on the two sided argumentative aspects of thought' (1996:157). Billig, therefore, correctly identifies a key problem within cognitive psychology and also, I'd argue, within structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to ideology, discourse and subjectivity. The difficulty is that cognitive studies of thought have a tendency to exclusively stress the importance of categories in organising, and indeed determining, thought. As a result of this, he argues, they tidy up the mind in a way which leads to a view of thought as reified and 'bureaucratised' into categorical schemas, such as stereotypes, which then become the basis of all thought. This precludes the possibility of reflexive, tolerant, conflictual, dilemmatic and creative thinking, beyond these categories.

Instead of seeing thought as output from such rigid schemas, Billig proposes a view of thinking as 'dilemmatic' because, as he puts it, ideology and common sense are comprised of contrary themes, 'without which individuals could neither puzzle over their social worlds, nor experience dilemmas' (1988:2). This is a perspective which must be kept in mind if we are to understand how young people can both be channelled by, and challenging of, aspects of marketing and branding discourses. In other words, it is the very existence and experience of the dilemmas noted above which testify to the difficulties which inhere in 're-engineering the self' into a series of commodified consumer choices, which aim to conflate the experience of people with the experience of things, i.e. commodities.

Rose's perspective, which highlights the potential power of 'expert knowledges', particularly in relation to the application of 'Psy knowledge' to the construction of both

consumer brands, and subjects, in the ever widening sphere of consumption<sup>74</sup> - is very useful. However, as I suggested above, a functional bias emerges in his account of the self. His work, like Giddens, cannot account for versions of the self and concepts of identity, which exist outside the structures of official power knowledge. That this is the case, I think, roots back to his use of Foucault's work on discourse and discursive regimes. Billig, correctly identifies this work, as having a cognitivist tendency to seal subjects into historically conditioned modes of thought.

Foucault tends to lock discourses, and thereby regimes of thinking, into particular historical periods, as if certain critical thoughts are unthinkable until the prevailing regimes of discourse start to crack. (1996:15)

The nub of the problem therefore, is that neither Giddens, nor Rose, pays sufficient attention to the role of forms of unofficial and oppositional knowledge about the self and the social world more generally. These, as we will see in **Chapter Five**, can emerge from, and engage with, young people's experience of the contradictions of consumption, socially, materially and ideologically. Thus, discourses which arise beyond the existing officially sanctioned, limited parameters of self-reflexive knowledge (Giddens: *ibid.*), or beyond expert knowledge or 'ethical repertoires' (Rose: 1999:265), tend to be ignored. As a consequence, though Rose sees the subject as a 'psy shaped space', agency is neither a word, nor a concept, which meaningfully appears in his explanation. In his analysis, self activity and practice are incorporated as a general ruse of power, as subjects, returning to the terms of Giddens's dilemma, act in ways which can only reinforce their subjectification, through consumption.

### **3.3 Embodiment and emotional experience**

There are further, and perhaps more fundamental criticisms to be made of, and questions to be asked about, overly voluntaristic reflexive and cognitive approaches to social practices, especially consumption. In particular, with regard to the experience of consuming brands, we need to consider how much of this experience is cognitive and critically reflexive and how much of it is an embodied experience, dependent on, and conditioned by, sensuous pre-epistemic perceptions as well as feelings and emotions? We also need to ask whether it is possible or desirable to disentangle these dimensions from each other?

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<sup>74</sup> Given decades of privatization this is a vastly expanded area of social life, *cf* Edwards (2000).

In this section, I will briefly outline a number of key perspectives on embodiment in order to develop an approach to consumption as reflexive, dilemmatic and embodied. In recent decades another split has opened up in psychology between essentialist and constructionist perspectives<sup>75</sup>. The resolution of the mind body dichotomy which underlies this polarisation, between biological essentialism and Social Constructionism<sup>76</sup>, especially those which stress the role of discourse, has been sought in a number of moves. These include attempts to reconfigure the role of the body in psychology, and to develop an embodied approach to the self, in particular, in relation to the emotions.

Blackman's study of 'Schizophrenia', self help and the Hearing Voices Network (2001) contains a succinct overview of the possibilities for the development of an intermediary position, if not a dialectical synthesis, between those who emphasise the biological in the make up of the self, and those who emphasise the social and discursive. She makes two points which are crucial. Firstly, it is not a matter of finding the point of 'interaction' between the biological and the social, as if they were 'two separate categories' (2001: 78). Rather, the way out of the mind body dichotomy, she argues, may lie with work in the field of medical anthropology and in particular the work of Csordas (1994) on embodiment and experience. For Csordas, 'the body is an agent not a resource', and 'biology is always a situated, a dynamic process'. However, this is not simply a matter, she argues, of an interaction between two discrete entities, the biological and the social, rather we need to think of a subtle synthesis between both, which means, 'we carry the social in our bodies'. Drawing on Csordas, she argues:

the strategies and understandings that people use to engage with bodily experiences transform the bodily experience itself. Neither one nor the other can be disentangled there is a synthesis of bodily experience with a deep sociality. (Blackman *ibid.*: 227-228)

Charlesworth's (2000) application of the concept of embodiment, as I suggested earlier in the discussion of Bourdieu's 'habitus' (1986), has proved to be richly insightful. He has explained how working class men and women come to inhabit a 'habitus' or disposition, which in bodily physical gestures, manners and posture, or in 'comportment', as well as in language, allows them to survive their abject milieu

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<sup>75</sup> Chapter Three deals with the debates which have shaped these splits in relation to the status of language, discourse and the real.

<sup>76</sup> Again, Social constructionism is dealt with in 3 (3.4, 3.5).

(Charlesworth 2000: 64-66). Despite its considerable strengths, one of the main difficulties with his account is the strong emphasis, he places, on what he calls, following Merleau-Ponty (1962), 'the pre-objective' (ibid.: 181); 'pre-epistemic' (ibid.: 205) 'primacy of perceptions' (ibid.:169). This emphasis, however, excludes the possibility of any sustained critical reflection on life conditions, of the order of what Bourdieu calls critical, or 'second order language' (ibid.:286). It is just this kind of reflexive capacity which both Vygotsky and Žižek see as central to the subject or self. However, Charlesworth insists, if working people were to engage in such critical reflection they would court psychological disaster and 'misery' (ibid.:182). Thus, he argues, the overriding appeal of 'a philosophy of self willed ignorance' (ibid.) for working class people, rather than Giddens's self-reflexivity. The difficulty I have with this argument is that, as I pointed out with regard to Bourdieu, though it is right to address the limits on subjective agency and on critical reflexivity, as a part of this, Charlesworth following Bourdieu all but rules subjective agency out.<sup>77</sup>

There is, I think, a further problem with Charlesworth's work on embodiment. He tends to shift the emphasis away from cognitive reflection, and thinking, with regard to the emotions and feelings, onto the precognitive. This suggests there is a point at which the cultural and historical influences which shape the sense of self, and the emotional experience of the self, come to a grinding halt. From this inferred point, experience becomes purely a bodily matter as the docile body, beyond culture is reached. Yet there is a tension between this argument and Charlesworth's use of Bourdieu - for whom the inculcation of the habitus went so deep that culture became second nature. Blackman cautions against such a reinstallation of the mind/body dichotomy, arguing that studies on the emotions and feeling have tended to remain trapped within the body/ cognition dualism, 'shifting to the cognitive work that makes emotions possible', but in effect, reversing, rather than, synthesising the distinction (2001:218).

Despite these criticisms, his work remains highly suggestive, particularly his use of Bourdieu's concept of 'ontological complicity' (2000:18), which refers to the phenomenologically auratic feeling of 'at oneness' with others, which emanates from shared class dispositions. It says much about why particular branded clothing, and ways

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<sup>77</sup> Beyond individuals limited strategic adjustments or moves within the constraints of the habitus hard to conceive.

of wearing them, become so invested with positive feelings of comfort and emotional security, for so many young people. Equally, the lack of 'ontological complicity' explains why the same clothes draw such powerful and intolerant expressions of aversive disgust, from others, namely those from a different class habitus, *cf* 4(3.3 to 3.6).

Finally, again at the empirical level of concern with fashion and dress as embodied practices, Entwistle uses the work of Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu to argue consumption practices must be understood in neither a deterministic or voluntaristic manner. She rejects the voluntarism of Polhemus' (1994) analysis of street styles, 'one is free to fashion oneself autonomously', which 'glosses over structural constraints such as class and gender'. Rather, she argues that comprehending dress 'requires understanding not just how the body is represented within the fashion system', but also - and I think most importantly for my results - 'how the body is experienced and lived' through dress (2000:38-39).

### **3.4 Critical Psychology**

This chapter has examined the concepts of, and relationship between, subjectification and structuration, subjects and subjectivity, and agents and agency, as well as the interpretative/reflexive, cognitive/dilemmatic and embodied dimensions to subjectivity. A range of critical perspectives have been engaged from Structuration theory to Foucauldian Governmentalism, and from Psychoanalysis and Post-structuralism to Phenomenological, and Marxist perspectives. However I have not as yet specifically discussed the contribution of Critical Psychology to these debates.

Critical Psychology has been defined by Blackman as follows. 'A move from an inner world of psychological processes, to a concern with how the 'psychological' is constructed through the workings of language, discourse and social and historical processes' (2001:6). Valerie Walkerdine, whose work helped to establish Critical Psychology as an alternative body of knowledge, and as a radical critical alternative to mainstream Psychology, along with her collaborators Lucey and Melody, usefully describes the triumvirate of concepts central to its approach. 'Subjectification refers to the production of subjects in discursive practices, subjectivity the lived experience of being a subject' (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody: 176). These authors argue, Critical

Psychology, defines itself against the individual/society dualism of traditional Sociology and Psychology, in which the social and psychic are considered discrete entities pitched against each other as ‘opposite poles or forces’ (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001:140). Blackman and Walkerdine argue further, that breaking from this dualism entails moving beyond the traditional presumption, ‘that the social domain is merely a context welded onto a pre-given individual’ (Blackman and Walkerdine 2001:47).

This is a position with which I substantially agree. However, taking this argument forward, Walkerdine et al argue for, what appears to be, a stronger version of psychoanalytically informed post-structuralism. This, following the work of Althusser, assumes, “a position of ‘absolute interiority’ between the subject and the social” (2001:140). My response to this position and its implications is more critical. Walkerdine argues for the significance of the ‘lack of fit’ (2002:8) between subjects and subject positions as the basis of subjective resistance. Yet, the Althusserian style formulation of ‘absolute interiority’ significantly downplays the possibilities for agency, both individually and collectively. That subjective agency can emerge from the kind of reflexive semiotic mediation, advanced by Vygotsky, has been crucial to my assessment of the range of positions on the subject, or self outlined above. I part company at this point with this version of Critical Psychology since, as Elliot argues, it echoes the tendency for theorists of subjectification to move back towards a Frankfurt school type concept of the ‘totally administered society’ (Elliot in Walkerdine ed 2002:17). As Vygotsky and Žižek both demonstrate, no discourse, power knowledge or ideology ever completely fills up, regulates seamlessly, or becomes completely hegemonic, in Gramscian terms. The problem with Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody’s position above, is not that it stresses the subject is social through and through. Rather, the problem is that, like Rose, they don’t sufficiently account for the social fact that the social itself is contradictory through and through, as Billig, Gramsci and Žižek all argue.

This literature review has established a number of important critical threads against voluntarism, abstraction, hyper rationalism, disembodiment and the relegation of the emotions. With regard to the latter, I am wholeheartedly in agreement with the subjective approach which attempts to account for the psychic costs of class society,

which Walkerdine's (et al 2000), Skeggs' (1997) and Charlesworth's (2000) work all demonstrate, so powerfully. Wendy Hollway argues, it is 'the hyphen in the psycho-social that is important' if the dualism of 'the intra-psychic or social is to be avoided in favour of something that genuinely articulates the hinge or hyphen' (2004). I would add that there can be no hyphen without careful analysis of the two substantive conceptual entities which it abridges, the psychic and the social. Thus, as I stated in the introduction, this research aims to combine the political and emotional economy of consumption.

#### **4. Conclusion: Agency, subjectivity and the consuming self**

The dilemmas, dualities, dualisms and tensions official philosophers refer to, and which I have discussed above, are also experienced as the everyday stresses, strains and anxieties - as well as pleasures - of being a young consumer. I would argue that young peoples' experience of consumption, and its impact on their sense of self-identity, has the potential to become the object of critical reflection as well as of the official governmental discourse which tries to position them in neo-liberal conditions, as choosing consuming subjects, as Rose argues. The work of Žižek, in particular, contends that despite the attempt to produce subjects, through processes of subjectification or subjectivation, these never completely succeed in closing the gap between the Real and the Imaginary. The subject, for Žižek, exists precisely in the subjective work of the imaginary, which strives to negotiate this gap between the Symbolic and the Real.

Butler's work on the performativity of sex through gender practices and, in particular, her invocation of parody and irony as important means to subvert and resist the Cartesian derived matrix of gender, sex and sexual essentialism, also suggested a space for agency, albeit, in her terms, as a matter of 'a deed without a doer'. Her concept of 'performativity' is also highly suggestive, given the way some young women in the focus groups use brands in the performance of particular, class inflected, versions of gender. Bourdieu's work also revealed the possibility for a limited form of agency, through the concept of strategic moves, or strategies, within the overarching of the possible by the probable, enacted by the constraint of the habitus. Giddens' structuration theory, which I compared favourably against Rose's work on subjectification, took the possibilities for agency much further. He stresses the self-

reflexive capabilities of knowledgeable actors, as both constitutive and constituted agents, who through their praxis could make and remake both themselves and the social structure. Criticising the extent of these possibilities, I argued, Vygotsky, though emphasising the possibilities for reflexive agency enabled by 'semiotic mediation', also stressed the embodied and social nature of action and interaction in the material world - unlike Giddens.

In relation to Critical Psychology, I argued, it was right to stress the need to break with the individual/ society dualism. Because of the thoroughly social nature of the self, the downgrading of the subjective study of experience - appears much mistaken. However, I also argued, the view of the social self should not lead to a position in which the emphasis on modes of regulation of the self, begin to echo the analysis of society as 'totally administered'. As I argue in **Chapter Three**, following Gramsci (1971) and Billig (1988), if the self is indeed social through and through, then the thoroughly contradictory nature of the social ideologically and discursively, makes the self, and consciousness itself, just as contradictory. In examining the three key dimensions of subjective self experience, reflexivity, cognition and embodiment, I have also indicated the value of moving beyond, not only the individual/society dualism, but of the rational and cognitive/emotional and embodied split. This is a crucial move in relation to this study because the consumption of dress, branded clothing and other goods emerges, in the results, as dispositional and embodied, as well as reflexive. It is therefore not just about our thoughts, but about 'how the body is experienced and lived' (Entwhistle 2000:38-39).

My aim in *Consuming Brands*, as reflected in the methods chapter which follows, and as developed from this, and the previous chapter, is to engage and explore the terrain of 'the hyphen' in the psycho-social, as Hollway (2004) puts it. My focus therefore is on the subjective material and embodied experiences; the feelings and emotions; the ideological dilemmas (Billig 1988) and the contradictory perspectives and dispositions which, together, make up consuming brands, and young peoples' sense of identity.

# Chapter Three

## Methods

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Cultural Studies and its people

Ferguson and Golding's, *Cultural Studies In Question*, brought together a number of key authors, whose essays contributed to an important critical reappraisal of the state of play in Cultural Studies, in the late 1990s. In his contribution, Michael Billig, expressed dismay as to the 'lack of people' in Cultural Studies. It was, 'a depopulated discipline' (1997:205), Billig argued, which was guilty, of 'overtheoreticism' and piling one 'theoretical construction on top of another' without ever 'touching ground' (Hall 1988). That 'the lives of people, their thoughts and feelings', were rarely present was, odd, to say the least. Billig argued, this lack of people in Cultural Studies, seemed all the more strange given its focus on ideology, from the 1970s onwards. It seemed to Billig, that the crucial advice given by Marx and Engels, in *The German Ideology*, that the study of ideology should begin with the activity of 'real men', had largely been ignored.

My position, though broadly in agreement with Billig's assessment of the aridity of too much abstract theory, seeks to develop his argument by adding some important qualifications and nuances to it. Whilst, I think that 'real'<sup>78</sup> people in Cultural Studies are indeed something of a scarcity, the situation has been rather more complex, uneven and historically fluid in character, than Billig suggests. He argues, it is odd that Cultural Studies - which had such a strong focus on ideology for much of the 1970s and 1980s - should end up engaging in too much theoretical abstraction, removing itself from lived experience. Billig infers, the source of this difficulty lies with Cultural Studies mistaken approach to ideology and language. Whilst he is right to think this, I want to make the argument over ideology more explicit. Thus the problematic status of the concept of ideology, within Cultural Studies is, I think, as central to the explanation of its abstraction, as the critique Billig makes of its mistaken approach to language. With regard to the latter, Billig argues, Cultural Studies neglects the utterance, the realm of

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<sup>78</sup> By 'real' I mean a conception of people, in line with Critical Realist thinking, as being part of an extra-discursive material reality (as well as a related discursive realm), and as embodied agents, who, as conceived by structurationist social theory are both constituted and constituting. 'Real' here is to signal the contestedness of reality and to indicate the argument that will be developed for seeing people as much more than the effects of discourses, strategies, structures, ideologies or manifestations of power, or as more than 'ciphers', as Billig puts it.

spoken words, preferring instead to emphasise 'parole' rather than 'langue', in Saussurean terms.

Thus, Billig correctly infers, it is not the focus on ideology per se which has led to aridity and 'overtheoreticism'. Rather, it is Cultural Studies specific reading of the concept of ideology which is problematic. As I will argue later, it is this disembodied and overly idealist conception of ideology, together with attendant conceptions of language and consciousness, which emerged from Cultural Studies engagement with 'Marxism' and Structuralism in the 1970s, which explains the depopulation of the subject and which also, therefore, needs revision. In addition to revisiting the question of ideology, I also want to emphasise the need for a more explicit engagement with social psychological perspectives on language and consciousness. Following on from Billig's and other critiques, which have been produced by those working in the field of Critical Psychology, such as those of Harré (1998 and 1999), Parker (1998 and 1999), Willig (1999) and Cromby and Nightingale (1999 and 1999a), I will also underline the case for an approach to consumption which stresses the importance of Critical Psychology.

As Blackman and Walkerdine (2001:111) argue, 'a general trend of suspicion and refusal' marks out Cultural Studies' response to Psychology. 'Psychology is on the one hand viewed as reductionist (Morley 1992), yet a psychology is assumed within these writings' (ibid.). Thus, in the work of a range of cultural and social theorists, from Baudrillard (1983) to Jameson (1991), there is an implicit and often contradictory deployment of psychological conceptions of the subject, despite their explicit disavowal. This contradictory approach, combined with a lack of engagement with Critical Psychology, these authors argue, cuts Cultural Studies off from much that could be of relevance to debates about the subjective psycho-social experience of cultural practices. Thus, the deep oddity that a subject which once uniquely placed ordinary people, centre stage, in the work of Williams (1958, 1961, 1965 and 1990) and Thompson (1963), has tended to remove them. This anomaly, I would argue, can be fruitfully addressed by a renewed critical focus on language, consciousness and ideology, which **'rules in'** not 'out' perspectives from Critical Psychology.

## 1.2 The shifting position of the people in Cultural Studies

The tendency to abstraction in Cultural Studies, whilst far from being the whole story, remains a significant problem. Despite recent attempts to reinsert the people, as self-conscious embodied agents (Skeggs: 1997, Couldry: 2000), back into the frame of analysis, 'under-population' remains. Too often, the people have become rapidly shifting subjectivities rather than socially and materially grounded, embodied selves. From the early 1980's onwards, as the 'linguistic turn' (Tudor 1999: 49-50) began to be overshadowed, Billig argues, there was something of a shift back towards a more people centred approach. It manifested itself in the work of number of key theorists and researchers who grounded their approach beyond the dry semiotics of the text, and the Althusserian inspired, 'reading off' of the subject in ideology - whether on the screen (Mulvey, 1975), stage (Belsey, 1980), or page (MacCabe, 1978). Decontextualised 'Screen'<sup>79</sup> type analysis, premised on a direct transmission of meaning from text to reader, had earned Cultural Studies the pejorative title, 'ideological studies' (Carey 1989: 97). Instead of this, a move to a much more people centred ethnographic, qualitative approach<sup>80</sup> by Willis (1977); Morley (1980, 1986) and Radway (1987), pioneered a fusion of Williams' commitment to 'culture as ordinary', with Geertz' notion of 'thick description' (1973: 238), *cf* 1 (2.6).

However, what appears to have been lost, in this otherwise positive development, was a view of ideology which linked it to power and, more specifically to a concept of power, which maintained its centredness, in contradistinction to Foucault's (1980) (1988) dispersal of it across social discourses, relations, institutions and subject positions. In particular, theoretical frameworks which stressed that the reproduction of structural inequality in society was achieved, in part, through the attempt to shape consciousness and ideas, took a back seat. This occurred as Althusser's attempt to bring together the material and symbolic functions of ideology, crashed under the weight of its conceptual contradictions (Hirst, 1979:65 in Hall & du Gay 1996:6). In its place a more diffuse, less centred view of the terrain of ideas and their relationship to power, came to the fore.

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<sup>79</sup> For a clear overview and critique of the Screen approach see Tudor (1999:84-108).

<sup>80</sup> Though Cultural Studies, through work on sub-cultures begun by Clarke (1976), continued by Willis (1977) and Hebdige (1979), had an explicit focus on people in its focus on youth subcultures, this work, however accomplished and insightful, did not for the most part transcend structural and semiological readings of aspects of dress and style, Hebdige (ibid.).

In place of the now apparently outmoded concept of 'ideology', the use of the term 'discourse' and 'field of discourses', grew (*cf* Curran 1996:130-132). Thus, Billig asserts, the fate of the concept of ideology and the position of people in Cultural Studies are intimately related. Therefore, critical discussion of ideology, its fate and usefulness as a concept, forms a central part of my approach to young peoples' consumption of branded goods and the ideas and experiences they express in relation to it. As I argue below, one important consequence of this change in orientation towards the concepts of ideology and power has been the development of a particular reading of Foucault's work on the dispersal of power, through technologies of the self. This in turn has licensed a disembodied voluntarism amongst some theorists of consumption.

As I argued above, *cf* 1(2.6), however, the people, their thoughts, experiences, voices and practices, have begun to move back into the frame in Cultural Studies. Work such as that of Skeggs (1997) and Couldry (2000) has focused on the subjective experience of class and gender positions, and the media frame, respectively. But this trend has been neither hegemonic nor unproblematic. Despite the qualitative empirical work, carried out by these two analysts, and some others, Cultural Studies' treatment of subjectivity leaves much to be desired. In a significant strand of work which deals with contemporary consumption - abstraction remains a difficulty. As my argument in **Chapter One** suggested, there has been a marked tendency to downplay the materially embodied and socially conditioned construction of agency, and thus to argue voluntaristically that 'subjects', and more specifically consumers, are now sovereign and 'free' to consume. Such work suggests, 'you can be anything you want, identities can be adopted and discarded like a change of costume' (Lasch 1985:38).

In many studies of consumption a marked, if variable, inclination towards a postmodern form of Culturalism, continues, *cf* 1(3.1 to 3.4), Fiske (1989), Nava (1990) (1991), Mort (1996), Nixon (1996) and Lury (1996). Despite the turn to ethnography, the people remain a 'they', all too often the province, and product, of the empty deduction which characterises the meta-language of postmodern research. As we saw in 1(2.2 and 3.1) speculation, made on the basis of analysis of macro changes, the imputed switch to post-Fordism economically, is coupled to inferential analysis of subjectivity drawn from the deconstruction of texts.

## 2. People as mutable identities or disciplined selves?

In this work identity is purely discursively conceived, a particular post-structuralist and constructionist move, which by reducing people to dispersed subjectivities, denudes them of any ontological depth and corporeal embeddedness in their material milieu. As a consequence, constraint by embodiment, power relationships and differential position in terms of access to resources, whether in the form of cultural, symbolic, social or economic capital (Bourdieu 1991: 229-31), is ignored.

McNay (1999) argues identity in Foucauldian analyses and, I would add, in much postmodern work which has drawn on Foucault, tends to be mistakenly conceived in overly symbolic and discursive terms. It is thus all too often disembodied, and I would add dematerialized. Hence, she argues, Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus' (1986 [1984]:169-173), *cf* 2(1.5), offers a 'timely corrective' to Foucauldian work. It has a more grounded understanding of identity and offers a more critically incisive, and circumspect, analysis of the potential for identity change. She argues that the 'emphasis on the mutability of identity' which arises from seeing gender, for example, as primarily a matter of symbolic identification rather than 'embodied existence' (McNay 1990:95-117), is fundamentally flawed in its idealistic voluntarism. In addition, there is something more that is amiss with this approach. As Hall (1996) has argued, it also fails to offer any account of why subjects 'invest' in identities or 'subject positions' (1996:6). Psychoanalytical concepts of 'identification', he suggests, may offer the means to traverse or 'articulate' the gap in the work of Marx, Althusser and Foucault, and between accounts of, 'how individuals are summoned into place in discursive structures,' and 'how individuals are constituted' (*ibid.*:13).

As I argued in **Chapter Two**, work on consumption which has drawn on Foucault's analysis, also tends to ignore questions of agency, *cf* 2(1.1 to 1.4), its conditions of possibility, and the task of trying to usefully elaborate on, the unresolved dynamic between the 'constituted' versus the 'constituting' dimensions of subjectivity. Most significantly, the dynamics of the relationship between subjects and 'technologies of subjectification'<sup>81</sup> has largely been ignored by Cultural Studies. This considerably

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<sup>81</sup> 'Technologies of subjectification' is a term which I use to bring together Rose's arguments made in Chapter 16:217-218 of Governing the Soul The Shaping Of The Private Self and the Afterword:264-265,

reduces the potential for the enriched analysis of consumption which an engagement with this dimension of his work might provide. The selective take up of 'bits' of Foucault's analysis amounts to a form of theoretical cherry picking. It has led to a far too uncritical exploration of the possibilities for identity play, afforded by the voluntaristic use of 'techniques of the self' based upon new consumer dress styles, accessories and cosmetics. This is particularly a feature of the work of Nixon (1996), but also of Mort (1996) and others too (*cf* Nava et al eds 1997).

With regard to consumption, and its 'Foucauldian turn' (Nava et al 1997:5), the place of the people, their thoughts feelings and practices, remains a disputed territory, characterised by a dichotomy. As I indicated in the previous chapter, in contrast to Mort and Nixon's approach, Rose and Miller, at times, argue for a much more 'disciplined' and controlled version of the consumer. As we saw, for Rose, the consuming subject is seen as being 'bound' into consumption by expert technologies and discourses of subjectification. These function to compel people, as 'subjects', to consume in order to be 'free' as they pursue the 'myth' of mastery of their inner selves, in all its 'Psy' constructedness (Rose 1999). Whether, in fact, the conceptual architecture of Foucauldian analysis is preferable to the theorisation of agency offered by 'structuration' theorists, remains to be seen. What is not in doubt, in my view, is that to understand consumption, and the place of the consumer, necessitates keeping both the constraining and enabling dynamics of social practices, including consumption, firmly in tension - whatever the model.

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published in the Second Edition. Thus technologies refers to **the means, both discursive**, i.e. approaches and schools of psychology e.g. gestalt, behaviour or PCT person centred therapy as well as the actual psy 'experts' themselves - the psychoanalysts, counsellors, social workers, teachers, doctors and other practitioners/ professionals - **and their extra-discursive** [a term Rose is reluctant to use] 'domains of action' from the surgery to the school or interview room, **by which** we are addressed and encouraged as subjects to subjectify. That is to 'fabricate and stabilize particular versions' of our selves. In a manner I think suggestive of the unresolved tensions in his work, discussed in the previous chapter, Rose calls the plethora of 'psy' experts 'engineers of the soul.'

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Some key debates

At this point we might more usefully come face to face with the key philosophical arguments about the status of 'real' people, as subjects in Enlightenment thought. Additionally, it will also prove useful, I think, to now review in detail some of the debates which underpin the clashes of methodology, and method, in the social sciences, and in Cultural Studies. These, debates, inform and shape my overarching research question, *what is the relationship between young peoples' consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity?* as well as subsidiary questions such as, *to what extent is the consumption of brands enabling or constraining in terms of identity?*

Focusing on these questions immediately engages with a range of methodological and philosophical arguments (Hughes and Sharrock 1990, Williams and May 1996) which have a well established lineage within Post Enlightenment Philosophy and Social Theory (May 1996 and Callinicos 1999). New twists, emphases and rhetorical turns have, however, accompanied the emergence of Social Constructionist, Post-structuralist and postmodern arguments (Callinicos *ibid.*). Having criticised the abstraction, underpopulation and aridity of much Cultural Studies work on consumption, and noted the absence of 'real' people, the key question, clearly, is how can such inadequacies be overcome and the people put back into research - whilst simultaneously avoiding naïve humanism<sup>82</sup>? At this point an engagement with debates in Critical Psychology may prove useful. Methodologically speaking, my work will attempt to draw on a series of important discussions. These include the debates between 'interpretivists' and 'positivists' (Williams and May: 47-68) in Social Theory, and in Critical Psychology between 'Social Constructionists' and 'Realists' (see Parker 1998 and Nightingale and Cromby 1999). Attempting, very differently, to shape social, psychological and cultural research, these debates offer a rich set of resources for the critical analysis of *language*, *consciousness* and *ideology*.

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<sup>82</sup> By naïve humanism I am referring to a position, arising from Enlightenment philosophy, which asserts the centrality of human agency through rational knowledge and the scientific application of reason. Human beings are seen as autonomous knowing universal subjects, who are capable of a full understanding of the world and whose trajectory of knowledge consists of a steady path of progressive linear revelation and realisation of essential truths about the world, both physical and social. All in the cause of human progress and emancipation. The key point often absent from postmodern critiques of Enlightenment humanism is that it was never a homogenous perspective nor at all as uncritical as critics sometimes imply. Cf Callinicos (1999) or Hughes and Sharrock (1997) 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.

### 3.2 Questions of language, discourse and the real

Debates about language, and the status of words and utterances, conceived either as ‘a form of representation’ or as ‘a form of signification’ (Parker 1999:5), provide a key backdrop to my research. A selective overview of these debates, including contributions from Social Constructionist (SC) and Critical Realist (CR) psychology, should begin to make clear the overall ontological and epistemological perspectives which inform the specifics and practicalities of my method of research, namely that of a qualitative critical discourse analysis of focus groups.

Up until the diffusion of Saussurean linguistics, through the work of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, in 1960s and 70s, (*cf* Sturrock 1979), the dominant view of language was naively realist. Empiricism, meant language was conceived as a neutral window on the world. Outside of the highly specialised field of linguistics, little attention was paid to the form of language and its character as a system of signs. However, Saussure’s seminal claim made in, *The Course in General Linguistics* (1916) (quoted in Belsey 1980:40), that language far from referentially pointing to a pre-existing reality was, on the contrary, an ‘arbitrary system of signs’ which functioned, ‘not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position,’ dramatically changed the picture. Saussure argued language created the very reality we claim to know *through it*, and it drew its meaning endogenously and self-referentially, from its own system of differences and from the play of relations between signs, synchronically. Hoping to shatter the illusions of realism, he stated, ‘language is a form and not a substance’ (*ibid.*: 10).

Saussure described ‘the sign’ as *two sided*, analytically. It consisted of a signifier (the symbolic form) and the signified (the concept to which it referred) and, furthermore, the relationship between these two dimensions was completely unmotivated or ‘arbitrary’. Depending on your response, and on your underlying philosophical position, his work, which underpinned the ‘linguistic turn’ across the arts and social sciences, has either helped open up the study of culture to a liberating anti-essentialism, or reduced it to a destructive idealism, anti-humanism or ‘discursive relativism.’<sup>83</sup> It would be erroneous,

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<sup>83</sup> By ‘discursive relativism’ I am referring to positions based on post-structuralist and ‘social constructionist’ views of language which dispute there is any knowable reality outside of discourse and, that it is possible to establish the ‘truth’, or truthfulness, as more attributable to one explanation or theory

however, to simply isolate Saussure's work from the range of other thinkers, who have been integral to the challenge to the unified rational Enlightenment subject, upon whose shoulders positivist approaches to language have been built, (cf May 1996, Callinicos 1999). For a research study which centres on young peoples' talk, the status of the word and utterance is crucial. In order to assess whether Saussure did in fact get language right, it will be helpful to revisit the two antithetical views of language, with which I began. Returning to the opening division, between the version of language as 'significatory system' and as 'representation', an important part of the materialist critique of Saussure needs to be made explicit.

In a number of respects Saussure's arguments about language are crucially deficient. Firstly, whilst it seems entirely correct to reject any crudely empirical correspondence theory of truth, that reality (the thing) and representation (the signifiers or symbols for that thing) can ever be one. However, to insist, that socially and historically generated concepts (signifieds) shape our sense of those things, and their distinctiveness, doesn't mean there isn't any basis for categorical distinctions, in reality, per se. As Eagleton argues, 'a society which registered no distinction between water and sulphuric acid' would long be, 'in their graves' (1991:203-204). In support of this link between discursive differentiation and reality, Harré (1999) argues, persuasively, for a materially engaged version of Social Constructionism. This takes into account what he calls, 'the materiality and intransigence of the body.' Drawing on his experience of grading sheep fleece, and assisting expert wool judges, he argues, though this process is shaped by knowledge of type-hierarchies or classificatory schemes, distinctions could not have developed had fleece not differed, in texture and colour. Harré points out, taxonomies are humanly forged but, 'the realisation that there are many ways of classifying things into kinds does not entail that any of them are arbitrary' (Harré 1999: 109). Similarly, Cromby and Nightingale assert, merely telling us there are so many words for snow in Greenland, doesn't demonstrate discourse can be 'divorced from materiality'. On the contrary, it demonstrates the 'very rootedness of social discursive constructions' in the material realities and 'activities of everyday life' (ibid.:12). The point is to grasp the dialectic whereby reality shapes discourse, just as discourse shapes reality.

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about the world than another. Hence the relativisation of social theory which has wider implications for the status of narratives and perspectives on morality, politics, culture and history, amongst other areas.

### 3.3 The death of the *commodity object*?

Secondly, developing this argument further, there are actually *three* entities to be considered in the understanding of language. These are the referent, the object or thing in itself as well as the signifier and the signified. But it is the referent, or the thing in itself, which is often, conspicuously missing from Saussurean accounts of language, and from explanations and deployments of his work in Cultural and Media Studies<sup>84</sup>. Thus the referent is constantly conflated with the signified, the concept of the thing, by proponents of Saussure. Thus, Hindess and Hirst, Eagleton argues, “effect a fatal semiotic confusion between ‘signified and referent’” (ibid.: 209). Moreover, as Sayer contends, social theory has witnessed the *‘death of the object’*, a move away from understanding language as part of wider social practices which include linguistic or discursive dimensions, but which cannot be reduced to these. Drawing on Bhaskar’s concept of ‘practical reference’ (Bhaskar 1997), Sayer argues, the physically embodied aspect of our ‘picking things’ out, in, and from, the world, gets conveniently ignored. ‘The act of reference’, he argues, ‘has been widely overshadowed by a preoccupation with the horizontal relation between signifiers’ (Sayer 2000: 36).

This argument about the death of the object is of particular importance to my study. It echoes Slater’s analysis of ‘dematerialisation’ (1997). I would argue for the necessity of maintaining the physicality, and thus the reality, of commodities. Material or physical embodiment works both ways. It is not just a matter of embodied subjects, but of embodied objects too. The extent to which the material dimensions of branded goods, remain part of young peoples’ experience of them, forms a key research aim. Thus, crucially, the ‘thingness’ of objects, their materiality ontologically, means consumer goods remain in part material. This is in contradistinction to those who, taking their lead from Baudrillard’s (cf Poster 1988) misreading of Marx with regard to ‘use value’, 1(1.1), reduce consumer goods to a postmodern symbolic realm. As Voloshinov insisted, ‘without ceasing to be a part of the material reality... any consumer good can be made into an ideological sign’ (1973:50-51). Collier argues that far too often people think Saussure has shown that words get their meanings from their relationships with other words and not from their relationship to reality. But he points out, ‘what he has in

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<sup>84</sup> cf Barker 2000:16-17 for an example of its omission.

fact shown is that words *refer to reality* by virtue of their relationship with other words' (1998: 48).

Finally, the idea that all language is equally unmotivated needs challenging. Whilst the notion of a correspondence theory of truth is clearly erroneous, to argue that there is no match at all between signs and the objects they represent is unsustainable. Sayer points out, it is not the case that all signs are equally arbitrary, particularly when signs are considered not as isolated units, but as words combined in discourse. Taking the example of discourse about health, including the words, 'hospitals', 'doctors', 'nurses', 'patients' and 'beds', he argues, whilst 'each of the terms is arbitrarily related to particular referents' this doesn't mean, 'the relationship between their referents is arbitrary', nor is, 'the relationships between signifieds.' 'The relationship between doctors and patients' is not equivalent to that between, "'doctors' and 'horse-jumping.'" (Sayer: 2000: 38).

Thus, the argument, which universalises the arbitrary nature of signification, is suspect. This is because it offers a deficient understanding of how language acts as a key mediating interface with the world, *cf* Vygotsky 2(2.7). As I argued earlier, language is best understood as a dynamic social practice, which is intimately bound up with our embodied thought and talk about reality, as well as our mediative or transformative acts of labour. It is just this very pivotal dimension, of the practical social use of language, as 'utterances' in combination, which Billig (1997) comments, was deemed least worthy of analysis in Cultural Studies. Conversely, it is this focus on their utterances, which I consider crucial to the understanding young people's experience of consuming brands.

### **3.4 Critical Realism *and/or* Social Constructionism?**

Surprising as it may seem, the potential exists to draw productively on the disputes between Constructionists and Realists. Nightingale and Cromby, make a very useful contribution when they ask Social Constructionists, a deceptively simple, but powerfully, demystifying question: 'What gets constructed?' (1991b: 213) Drawing on Collins' critique (1997:21) of the inadequacies of relativism, they proceed to critique Constructionist relativism by foregrounding the 'discrepancy' between the 'implicit ontological assumptions' upon which relativism relies, and elides, since discourse fundamentally must be about something. By doing this they draw attention to its

explicit failure to epistemologically engage with, explore and specify, what gets constructed. Thus, they argue, if ‘selves, persons, psychological traits and so forth... are social and historical constructions’ (Sampson 1989:2), then what are they like, ‘what properties do they come to have?’ (Nightingale and Cromby *ibid.*: 213)

Some would argue, the short answer for Constructionism, has been absolutely nothing. This answer has its adherents (Collins 1997), and it makes an important polemical point. However, it also reductively glosses over the complexity of positions, within Critical Psychology, which maintain the centrality of discourse, but never-the-less recognise the importance of material, physical, and biological, embodiment. Blackman (2001a), argues there are ‘good reasons for rejecting the biological’, vis-a-vis its role in ‘eugenics’ and ‘intelligence testing’. Never-the-less, she maintains, the necessity of accounting for biology, albeit critically reconceived as a ‘historical phenomenon’, within discourse, rather than as a constant outside of it (2001:8-9). Yet despite this important qualification, she points to the Constructionist tendency to dismiss corporeal physicality and to disembodify the subject, by turning it into an abstract universally enabled entity or ‘discourse user’ (*ibid.*). The importance of embodiment, to the sense of the self, and to the subjective experience of consuming brands and to group identity/belonging, discussed in 2(1.5) and 3(1.3) in relation to Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’, emerges powerfully in the results chapters.

Following on from this concern with materiality and embodiment, Nightingale and Cromby point out, it is at least possible there has been a ‘*mis*interpretation’ of Foucault’s statement, that discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972:49). But this possibility doesn’t seem to have halted the march of discursive relativism, for the majority wing of Social Constructionism (Edwards et al 1995:37). Others are more critically circumspect. Burkitt (1999) argues, it is absurd to claim there is nothing beyond discourse. Thus, when this argument is applied to the body, to state, ‘in and of itself it has no nature or properties’ reduces it to, what Nightingale and Cromby call (echoing Blackman), a ‘homogenized uniform plasticity... as though it was not there.’ But, they argue, just because something is a construction doesn’t make it any less real. Ergo, social constructions completely surround us, everything from ‘racism’, ‘governments’, ‘marriages’ and ‘marriage guidance’, to ‘child abuse’ and ‘crime’ to ‘buildings’ and

'cities'. However, they argue, 'none of these [things] are any less real for being socially constructed' (Nightingale & Cromby 1998:9). Burr argues that the tendency to talk of things being *either* real *or* 'merely constructed' is mistaken. What we need to do is to talk 'inclusively' of things as *both* socially constructed and real (1998: 23-24).

The main problem in relation to language and discourse, for Collins (1997), is not the argument that discourse does or doesn't lead to a constructed reality. Rather, there is a much more pressing need to explain why some ideas fail to get any reality constructed. He suggests focusing explicitly on which categories, concepts and other discursive entities are in circulation, and investigating which come to dominate discourse. The key task then is to ask how, and why, some discourses are 'materialised' whilst others are marginalised. Broadly speaking this is the method recommended by Fairclough. His Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1989, 1992 and 2001), draws on Gramscian approaches to ideology and consciousness, combined with critical readings of constructionist approaches to language. Thus Fairclough, in line with Critical Psychological perspectives, argues for the examination of the dynamics of discursive '*hegemonisation*'<sup>85</sup> and '*materialisation*',<sup>86</sup> and to locate the role of the discursive in broader social and cultural change. This can be done, by relating specific instances of discourse or 'discourse events' (Fairclough 1992:10) to their role in either 'contesting' existing hegemonic practices and relations or, in taking them as given' (ibid.).

Willig too, argues, against 'groundless constructionism' (1998: 213). Simply stating that 'this' or 'that' is a social construction, however valuable in terms of exposing the tendency of power to become naturalized, is never-the-less an impoverished and indeed potentially 'abstentionist' critical response (ibid.). The real critical challenge, she argues, is to explain why some social constructions, in both their discursive and extra-discursive elements, arise and are sustained, and to suggest, and argue for, alternatives. In other words, Social Constructionism is overwhelmingly used to 'deconstruct positivist categories'. Yet, what's really needed is a 'social critique of the (socio-

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<sup>85</sup> By the term *hegemonisation* I am drawing on Gramsci's use of the term, more specifically I am referring to the need to address two key questions. Firstly, which utterances, words and figures of speech achieve popular currency and secondly, why? E.g. within the focus groups, one key task is to analyse which words are used to describe categories of objects and people, and through the use of CDA to explain what their ascendancy into leadership in common sense discourse may tell us about the wider meanings of 'social practices', in Fairclough's terms, such as consumption.

<sup>86</sup> By the term '*materialisation*' I am seeking to draw critical attention to specifying precisely those discourses which Critical Realists, such as Willig, argue are those which do lead to the kind of constructed realities mentioned above from racism to cities.

economic/material) structures that support these categories'. She argues, Social Constructionist work must,

move beyond a description of 'regimes of truth' *and begin to account for their origin and maintenance*. Such an analysis should also allow us *to explore human subjectivity and its dynamic processes of self-formation*. (ibid.:38-39) [my emphasis]

### **3.5 Back to the gap between the symbolic and the real**

The major question, and dispute, as to how to assess the gap between the discursive and the extra-discursive<sup>87</sup>, between representation and reality and between the symbolic and the real, remains. Foster (1998), arguing broadly in support of Eagleton's critique of the post-Saussurean elision of the referent, maintains the existence of such a gap, between the symbolic and the real, justifies neither relativism, nor empty constructionism. Rather, it is the very existence of such a gap that makes epistemology possible, that is arguments as to how we can know what actually exists, ontologically speaking.

Much more importantly, without this tensioned divide it is hard to conceive of the space in which culture, practice and meaningful social life - let alone critique could take place. The gap between the symbolic and the real, and the struggle to mediate and explain it, for both Žižek and Vygotsky, constituted the space of the self, subject and subjectivity, 2(2.5 to 2.7). For Vygotsky, a non-essential but embodied self emerged in this space, through practical action, using symbols as mediating tools. In Žižek's analysis, the subject emerged as a non-essential agent too, but subjectivity was shaped by the psychodynamics of the imaginary and fantasy. Thus, rather than 'breaching this divide', as Foster (1998) asserts constructivist relativists tend to do by privileging the signifier, we need to maintain this space, 'neither privileging nor foreclosing the relation between discourse and practice.'

The gap or divide between discourse and material practices/structures provides an enabling distance which requires transformative labour (ideology goes to work on real situations); ways of talking (legitimizing, dissimulating, distracting, justifying) about our practices. (Foster 1998:111)

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<sup>87</sup> The fact that there is a gap is of crucial importance, since if the world were exactly as it appeared, if word and thing were the same and if there was absolute congruence between language, discourse and reality then we would have no need of any form of critical thinking or science. Thus it is axiomatic that such a gap exists or else there are no grounds for this critique or any other.

He argues, such a holding position, in relation to the tension between discourse and the real, far from undermining the importance of signification, and I would argue subjectivity, actually accentuates its status. The gap between the symbolic and real plays a crucial part in enabling what Willig calls, following the dialectical materialist biologists Levin's and Lewontin (1985), the 'potentialities' of human agency or the 'possible futures which can be accommodated by the present' (Willig 1998:40). I would argue, that everyday practices of consumption, including decisions about style, what to buy or not to buy; about what and who to identify with; about what to and what not to wear; about who and what to look at and how to judge them, operate in just this necessarily tense and intense ontological space. Furthermore, it is from within our experience of this space, between materially embodied objects and subjects, that discourse itself emerges as a socially and materially 'weighted', rather than 'a weightless way of carrying the world around with us' (Eagleton 1996:73). Thus, it is also this space, as the terrain of the psycho-social, which should be studied, since it is in this gap between embodied and experienced reality and the discourses of consumption, that questions to do with the self, group identity and consumption come to the fore.

Reviewing these key debates between CR and SC, enables me to underline my methodological positions, with regard to the research method employed on this project. Ontologically speaking, things can be both constructed and real, but epistemologically there is always going to be a gap, between the 'real' in terms of what actually exists, and our understanding of the real, through our discursive conceptualisations and representations of it. With regard to consumption specifically, this 'gap', to which attention has been drawn theoretically by a range of theorists including Berger (1972:148); Williamson (1978:65) and Goldman and Papson (2000:184), is *the space* in which marketing and advertising discourses inhere and hence it is also where ideology 'goes to work' (Foster: *ibid.*). It is this space too, the space of the self - in terms of embodied subjective experience and reflection - that constitutes the terrain of the hyphen in the psycho-social (Hollway 2005). It is here, therefore, that the *attempts*, which are made, to shape consumers' consciousness and sense of themselves, through the invocation to choose (Rose: 1989), can be most fruitfully examined. And it is to the question of how this invocation, is lived, negotiated and resisted - cognitively, reflexively and emotionally - that the results chapters are addressed.

### 3.6 Consciousness, its dilemmas and contradictions

It is fortunate, that instead of having to choose between psychological versions of the self which stress 'agency, rationality and self-awareness' (Parker 1999:23) and those which stress only constraint, control and 'discipline' of the human subject,<sup>88</sup> a third possibility exists. Parker, (op. cit.), argues for a synthesis of 'culturally grounded humanism', 'theoretically informed interpretation' and 'critical reflexivity' in approaching the question of the relationship of subjects to discourse, and the real. This is because he seeks to defend key elements of both critical humanist and Social Constructionist approaches to psychology. His work is thus a further indication of the productivity of the ongoing discussion with Critical Realists as to how best to conceive of the human subject, and its embodied consciousness, discourses and behaviour. Significantly, in my view, consciousness as Collier points out is always, 'consciousness of something' (1998:48). To specifically develop this argument we need to turn our attention to the matter of *how* we actually think of those 'somethings', and *how our thinking relates to our consciousness* in terms of attitudes, values and norms and, therefore, to the many facets of ideology.

Michael Billig has explicitly linked arguing and thinking, to consciousness (1988:18). His work is critical because his approach to thought challenges the paradigmatic suppositions in much Social Psychology that, understanding the self and consciousness, depends on two assumptions, methodological individualism and attitudinal consistency. In opposition to these 'Psy' shibboleths, Billig, argues that the starting point for understanding individual thought is not to look for the source of 'harmony' and 'consonance' in underlying 'grid or rules systems.' He pejoratively calls this the 'Rosetta Stone' (Billig 1988:19) approach to thought and cognition. It is emblematic of the, flawed, approach pursued in 'schematic' 'balance' theories (*cf* Taylor and Crocker 1981:90). Rather than this schematicism, knowledge, for Billig, is something which is 'socially shared' (Billig 1988: 20). Furthermore, since the shared knowledge, or common sense, which circulates in society, contains conflicting ideas and dissonant themes, then individual consciousness too is contradictory. Therefore thought and consciousness are far from being straightforward expressions of systematic 'inner beliefs' or singular 'inner belief systems' (*ibid.*:19).

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<sup>88</sup> Whether in discursive or extra-discursive practices.

Thus ideas do not present themselves, as the mere instances or workings out of more general schematic systems. Thought, because of its social nature, always contains dissonant elements, thus the contradictory nature of consciousness itself. Billig, therefore, offers two key things to the analysis of language and talk. A radical appropriation of some of the key themes found in the work of materialist theorists of language (Voloshinov 1986 [1929] and Vgotsky 1986 1934]). This is combined with an approach to ideology and consciousness which, in its refutation of evenness and consistency, parallels Gramsci's concept of dual consciousness (1971:324). Finally, with regard to Billig, I think, there is a need to explain if contradiction *always, necessarily*, characterises individual's thoughts? This question aside, his work contains some highly suggestive propositions with regard to the dilemmatic nature of consciousness, thought, utterance and ideology.

### 3.7 Ideology and discourse

Another central focus for any attempt to reground work in Cultural Studies is the need, to develop the critical conceptual architecture associated with the term 'ideology'. In particular, there is a need to specify the relationship of ideology to discourse and the real. Thompson (1984:1) describes how 'few areas of social enquiry' have been 'more marked by controversy and dispute' (1984:1). He outlines perhaps one of the most important fracture lines in the many varied meanings<sup>89</sup> the term has been given. This is the division between 'neutral' and 'critical' conceptions of ideology. In the case of the former, ideology is used as a purely descriptive term signifying 'systems of thought', 'belief' or 'symbolic practices.' No attempt is made to distinguish between, or evaluate, the ideas referred to. In the second usage, however, the 'critical' conception of ideology is, as he puts it, 'essentially linked to the process of sustaining asymmetrical relations of power' and to 'maintaining domination' (ibid.: 4).

More specifically Thompson argues for a socially and materially embedded version of the concept of ideology. He argues against the disconnected conception of it, which has arisen from Marx and Engel's use of the 'camera obscura' metaphor, in *The German Ideology*. This formulation suggests wrongly, I think, that ideology *necessarily* takes the form of a simple inversion of ideas and, is perforce, a matter of seeing the social

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<sup>89</sup> Eagleton lists sixteen different meanings (1991:1-2)

world upside down.<sup>90</sup> Thompson's prescient rejoinder to this is that, ideology 'is not a pale image of the social world but a part of it.' He draws, critically on the work of Castoriadis and Lefort (1971) on the 'social imaginary', exploring how language as a, 'creative and symbolic dimension' of the social world is used to represent 'collective life'. Thompson argues that, through 'metaphor', 'word play' and 'interpretation', we are 'involved knowingly or not, in altering or reinforcing of our relations with others and with the world' (ibid.: 6). His approach, which explicitly links language as social and dialogical utterances to ideology, follows that developed by Voloshinov (1973:9 [1929]), 'without signs there is no ideology'. Thus, Thompson argues for a detailed focus on the relationship of language to ideology, in order to understand how, 'creative, imaginary activities serve to sustain social relations which are asymmetrical with regard to the organisation of power (ibid.:6).'

This approach to the analysis of ideology and discourse, has been carefully honed and calibrated by Fairclough, to produce 'CDA' or Critical Discourse Analysis. The development of CDA, together with some of the wider philosophical issues it raises, as well as the actual practicalities of its use in my research, is outlined shortly, *cf* 3 (4.3). However, it remains necessary to elaborate a little more on why a version of ideology, which embeds it within social practices both material and discursive, should be of particular pertinence to my work. To clarify this, I want to turn to Žižek's (1994) very useful tri-partite description of the term. For Žižek, ideology has three key dimensions or 'axes'. These are firstly, 'ideologies as a complex of ideas (theories, convictions, beliefs, argumentative procedures)'. Secondly, 'ideology in its externality, that is, the materiality of ideology'. Here, Žižek refers to the institutional forces in society which attempt to disseminate the first, what Althusser termed the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' e.g. religion, education, the cultural and media industries. Thirdly, and finally, Žižek describes "the most elusive domain, the 'spontaneous' ideology at work at the heart of social 'reality' itself" (Žižek: 1994:9). This axis will be particularly important to my analysis, as the subjective mediating instance between axes one and three.

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<sup>90</sup> For a detailed discussion of the problems associated with, 'Camera Obscura' metaphor, see Eagleton (1991: 76)

The problem, as I see it, is that in Cultural Studies work, the moment when a potentially productive movement was made, away from, the focus on Althusserian ideological critique amounted to a lost opportunity. Thus, instead of an arid focus on a combination of Žižek's axes one and two, the 'texts' and 'effects' of ideology, there could have been a productive move to take up all three axes, including axis three ideology as 'active' or, what Žižek calls, the 'spontaneous' self-experience of subjects, as so called 'free individuals'. However this did not happen. Despite having sunk some subjective roots, with the Gramscian turn, as outlined in **Chapter One**, Cultural Studies' approach to consciousness and ideology remained stymied. This happened, I would argue, because of the conflation of ideology with the Foucauldian category of discourse, which saw all language as ideological.

What is needed in Cultural Studies today is a concept of ideology which, commits to an examination of its subjectively experienced and psycho-social dimensions, without losing sight of the bigger picture of the social relations of domination which persist under contemporary capitalism. It is the asymmetries of power in these social positions and relations, whether those of class, gender, sexuality and race, that the inflated Foucauldian concept of discourse is unable to handle. Eagleton's (1991) work on ideology defends the critical version of it. To maintain it as a tool of political critique, he argues, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms 'ideology' and 'discourse' and to reject the trend of replacing, or conflating, the former with the latter. This is because though the assertion, 'it's five o'clock!' certainly articulates power of a kind, in most daily circumstances it is primarily a discursive act, and not an ideological one (1991:201). Crucially, deciding as much depends, not on the analysis of language in the abstract, but on the analysis of living speech, and of actual utterances as dialogical discursive acts. Thus, it is from analysis of such discourse, that we may be able to say more about its wider significance as a part of our 'social practices'. For Eagleton, contra Foucault, the dividing line between discourse and ideology is necessary because if, 'ideas and material reality are given indissolubly together, there can be no question of asking where social ideas actually hail from (ibid.: 219).

As Žižek (1994) argues, regardless of its veridical status, it is its functionality with regard to 'relations of social domination ('power' 'exploitation') in an inherently non-transparent way '(ibid.:8), which makes an item of knowledge ideological. Moreover,

he points out that with regard to the ‘mechanisms of micro-power,’ Foucault never used the term ideology, but his abandonment of it, ‘entailed a fatal weakness.’

Foucault never tires of repeating how power constitutes itself ‘from below’, how it does not emanate from some unique summit.... [but] the abyss that separates micro-procedures from the spectre of Power remains unbridgeable (ibid.:13).

It is at this point that Billig’s work is again relevant. For Billig ideology has a central place in his rhetorical view of consciousness as contradictory, because it consists of ‘bits and pieces of social knowledge,’ in circulation in society, which give rise to social dilemmas as to how we should act, behave and think. These dilemmas are born out of the fact that people ‘share values, norms and social expectations’ (Billig 1988:15). He argues, contradiction arises in common sense terms because for every maxim there is a counter maxim. Thus, ‘absence makes the heart grow fonder’ versus, ‘out of sight out of mind’ (ibid.:15-16) etc. But the contrary nature of common sense knowledge has one more profound ramification, it provides, ‘the seed for thought itself in the debating chamber of the single mind’ (ibid.:17).

Billig’s overall point is that the actual form of ideological dilemmas is particular to specific types of society. This necessitates an approach to discourse which includes, ‘analyzing the meaning of pieces of discourse in order to interpret themes and counter-themes.’ He argues, the aim is to ‘explore’ not undermine ‘the complexities of meanings’ and the dialectics of discourse (ibid.: 21-24). Most crucially, Billig, following Gramsci’s division between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial consciousness’ (1971) and Žižek’s distinctions in the ideological axes, discusses the contrast between ‘formal’ or ‘intellectual ideology’ and ideology as ‘lived’ (ibid.: 25-27). Noting the danger of ascribing to individuals the status of being ‘thinkers living within ideology’, he recalls its unpleasant Althusserian functionalist echo. ‘The citizen’ who ‘absorbs the socially approved ideology’ has ‘the corresponding attitudes, inscribed in ritual practices...“according to the correct principles”’ (Althusser 1971: 167).<sup>91</sup>

In overall terms, the most significant argument to emerge from Billig’s critical re-appraisal of ideology, is his concept of thought being constructed discursively and rhetorically through a series of ideological dilemmas. This means that, because there

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<sup>91</sup> Althusser, L. (1971) quoted in Billig, M. (1988: 31).

are contrary themes to the panoply of social beliefs and ideas circulating in society, a very 'different image of the thinker', from that suggested by the Althusserian approach to the subject, emerges. This image recognises the existence of powerful ideological discourses, such as those of the marketing industries. However, it accepts that, 'though ideology may produce conformity,' it can also produce 'inconsistency', 'both between and within lived and intellectual ideology'. In short, the Althusserian image of subjects as 'unthinking bearers' of ideology and of 'schematic consistency' between Žižek's first, second *and* third axes, can be dispensed with. Ideology, 'provides the dilemmatic elements which enable deliberation to occur' (Billig *ibid.*: 31-32).

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Qualitative Approaches**

Thus, when it comes to the rationale for a qualitative approach to researching the role branded consumption plays in shaping identity, in terms of self, group and other, 'interpretivist' and 'hermeneutic' approaches (Williams and May 1996: 96-98) offer the most appropriate means to elicit data. Since my overarching research question focuses on understanding how, and why, late teenagers consume branded goods, this requires maintaining 'congruence' between epistemological and ontological considerations (*cf* Mason 1996:14).

Thus, my research aims for understanding, or 'verstehen', of the subjective experiences of consumption. Therefore, epistemologically speaking, my work draws on the interpretivist tradition, since ontologically the things that can be known from my research question, aims and design, will be young consumers' subjective meanings, thoughts and feelings expressed in discourse. As Seale, has argued, the aim of discourse analysis is 'not to give a representative overview' of 'attitudes'. Rather it is to examine how attitudes, orientations and choices are 'shaped, reproduced, and legitimised' discursively (1998:253). However, I also draw on Critical Realism, since my specific approach to discourse, is framed by a concern shared by Fairclough and Willig, to see how discourse<sup>92</sup> can contribute to 'materialisation'. As a focus on ideology is another key part of the research design, I will depart from thorough going Social Constructionist approaches to discourse, (*cf* Potter and Wetherell 1987). Thus, I will examine young peoples' discourse as 'both a topic and a resource' (*cf* Taylor 2001:15),

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<sup>92</sup> Which I view as never to be conflated with the real.

rejecting the idea that discourse can only tell me about discourse. I hold to the contrary position advanced by Voloshinov that, ‘the word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth’ (1973 [1927]: 19).

In terms of the specifics of method, the sample frame used is purposive. I have targeted ‘key informants’ (May and Pope 1995:109-112), since expenditure on branded clothes is high for late teens, who constitute a key target for the marketers, manufacturers and ‘coolhunters.’<sup>93</sup> My research, gives rise to a key subsidiary question which has also shaped the project design. *What is the relationship between the consumption of brands and class, gender and race identities?* To sum up, my research method combines qualitative focus groups, with CDA. The sample consisted of twenty groups, of three to six, late teenagers from Walthamstow, Essex and Herts. These areas have been chosen because of their divergent socio-economic and race/ethnic profiles and the groups were designed to be gender segregated.<sup>94</sup>

## 4.2 Focus groups

Focus groups have been chosen as the way to address the primary and subsidiary research questions for a number of interrelated reasons. They have many advantages. Participants can be engaged within the context of peer familiarity and interaction. This helps encourage the production of shared understandings, of the everyday use and meanings attached to branded goods. As Kitzinger (1995: 299-302) argues, focus groups encourage the ‘drawing out’ of modes of thought, ‘which previously might have not been articulated.’ In terms of power relations, group participation encourages ‘safety in numbers’.

For my purposes the group situation, its psychology and interpersonal dynamics is very important. If handled appropriately, using a quiet comfortable room with circular seating, ‘that does not create a focal point’ for the facilitator (Bloor et al 2001:52), focus groups can both encourage talk and discourage the tendency to talk things up, noted in one to one interviews. ‘Horizontal’ participation and discussion can then flow, helping to compensate for the ‘interviewer/interviewee’, hierarchical or ‘vertical’

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<sup>93</sup> Quart, A. (2003) Thus YI, (Youth Intelligence) and TRU, (Teenage Research Unlimited), both US firms, have thousands of paid teens and ‘tweens’ on their books. These net based ‘peer to peer’ marketers advise on brand images, ad copy and product design (p55).

<sup>94</sup> Cf Appendix One. Two groups ended up being of mixed gender.

power relationship. Thus elements of “collective consciousness” can arise as shared values and experiences ‘which would not be feasible using other methods’ and these can emerge along with ‘everyday use of language’ (Gibbs 27.10.03). However, clearly there are also disadvantages with focus groups. These include keeping participants focused. To achieve this I made use of interview guides framed by Merton’s four criteria of ‘Non-direction, Specificity and Range and Depth.’ Generalisability, is another key issue, but this can be addressed by arguing for the ‘validity’ of responses (Mays and Pope 1995:109-112) rather than for statistical representativeness. Validity, itself, can also be enhanced by feeding findings back to participants, and this was built in at the end of each session. ‘Reliability’ and ‘retestability’ can also be advanced by maximum transparency in procedures, (*cf* the guidance sheet in the Appendix).

Finally, very briefly, I want to outline how the sample groups were selected and how the sessions were run. The selection and recruitment of groups, was achieved by taking advantage of informal contacts I have with many former colleagues, and students, in FE colleges. Each focus group lasted between one, and one and a half hours, and in terms of structure followed the four stage approach, as explained in the guidance sheet. The limits to confidentiality in focus groups were explained at the start of each session. A clear briefing was given as to what focus groups are, and what to expect (Bloor et al *ibid.*:52).

### **4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis - CDA**

In 3(3.1 to 3.4), the argument was introduced that it was necessary to distinguish between language in the abstract, as a system of signs referred to as ‘La Langue’ by Saussure, and language in actual social use, as a discourse made up of utterances, or in Saussurean terms, ‘parole’. It is precisely this distinction which is central to Billig’s (1997) critique of the state of play in Cultural Studies and to his concern, as to its under-population and abstraction.

Fairclough’s CDA, develops this concern to address discourse as utterance, based on a critique and syntheses of a number of linguistic methods, which are then reshaped and recast in a particular, overall, dye. This is the overarching conception of discourse, conceived as a social, dialogical and ideological practice, as developed by the Russian linguist Voloshinov, in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1986 [1929]) - a

work which was produced as a critical rejoinder to Saussure. Thus, the broad social significance of dialogical talk, is one of the fundamental underpinnings of the approach, which I will adopt. More specifically, Fairclough's work on critical discourse analysis provides an important framework for my method. My use of aspects of his CDA, crucially hinges on the rationale, he deploys, for the term 'critical'. Critical approaches are different from non-critical approaches, because they:

...show how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief. (Fairclough 1992:12)

More specifically, Fairclough argues for a revised mode of discourse analysis which can overcome the limitations of Social Constructionist approaches. He argues that Potter and Wetherell (1987), despite producing a useful synthesis of positions on language, which helped to initiate a method that takes talk and discourse seriously, adopt an approach which is never-the-less flawed by many of the difficulties I outlined in 3(3.2 to 3.4), in relation to discursive relativism. Turning to the detail of his method of CDA, the key to Fairclough's approach is his concept of discourse as 'multi-dimensional' (Fairclough: 1992:4-5). Thus, for Fairclough, discourse is a 'difficult concept' which is most usefully defined as, i) a written or spoken piece of 'text' but also, ii) as *interactional*, or 'dialogic'. That means discourse should be viewed in its communicative use, and its contextual mode, and finally, iii) in the light of its wider socially *'constitutive or constructive effects'* (ibid.: 1992:4). This definition of discourse, he argues, entails a parallel *three-dimensional approach* to discourse *analysis*. Firstly, the specifically *'textual'*, necessitates close reading and analysis of the elements of 'vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and text structure' (ibid.: 74-75). Textual analysis of discourse can also include analysis of lexis or 'wording', 'figures of speech' and 'metaphor' (ibid.:236-237); analysis of 'modality' or the degree of identification with, or qualification of, statements, and analysis of 'transitivity'. Transitivity refers to the absence or presence of grammatical 'objects' in 'clauses', and whether statements are active or passive<sup>95</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Thus in 'The Discourse of New Labour: Critical Discourse Analysis' Fairclough illustrates the importance of transitivity. To write, or say, '*tobacco workers* select' 'leaves' rather than 'are selected' foregrounds, rather than elides, the role of third world workers and opens up more directly the issue of exploitation (2001: 243-244).

Secondly, it requires analysis in terms of *'discursive practice'*. This could include the examination of meanings in the wider contexts of their production, consumption and interpretation. Practically speaking, in the case of transcribed interviews, analysis could focus on the dynamics of meaning which occur across speakers, i.e. 'interdiscursivity'. It could also include analysis across texts or established 'speech genres' (Bakhtin 1953), and of 'hegemonic' (Gramsci 1971:57) or 'expert' discourses (Rose 1989:133-134). It also encompasses the level of 'intertextuality'<sup>96</sup>, by focusing analysis on the way that these discourses may be combined, and on the significance of particular combinations.

Thirdly, at perhaps the most general level, ideologically and socially, discourse can be analysed in terms of *'social practice'*. This refers to analysis which attends to its constitutive properties. In terms of practical analysis, we should be concerned to locate discourse in the 'macro-sociological tradition of analysing social practice in relation to social structures' (Fairclough 1992:72). Thus, analysis might, seek to explore contradictions and inconsistencies (*cf* Billig 1987) in discourse and 'discursive events'. These may then be read as **indices** of deeper frictions and struggles between social groups, and classes, over social, political and ideological change. CDA, therefore, also involves working to unpick emergent language and to examine, what Fairclough calls, 'new conventions' or 'hegemonies in the sphere of discourse' (*ibid.*: 1992:97).

Following on from this, another key aspect of such macro-sociological analysis of discourse as *social practice*, would be to identify changes in the 'orders of discourse.' This could be undertaken by analysing the matrix of 'interdiscursivity' and 'intertextuality', and by examining sets of discourses and their combinations. 'Orders of discourse,' a concept taken from Foucault's work, calls attention to how our particular vocabularies, categorizations, concepts and other words, more generally, tend to belong to one institutional discourse, but can cross over into another, as part of the restructuring of the material and ideological order. Studying the 'orders of discourse' may highlight new combinations, or 'innovative' creative recombinations, or uses of

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<sup>96</sup> 'Interdiscursivity' would in the context of my research mean, paradigmatically speaking, 'specifying what discourse types or genres are drawn upon' Fairclough (1992:232-234) for example whether official discourses, such as those of advertising, economics, psychology or humanism, manifest themselves. Analysis of the related term 'intertextuality' would involve analyzing and deconstructing transcriptions to see how these are deployed in relation to other discourses, syntagmatically, and with regard to modality and transitivity etc.

words in utterances and the development of new categories and concepts. A focus on the construction and development of such innovatory ‘discursive events’<sup>97</sup> and the attempt to consolidate new discursive ideological hegemonies, is fundamental for Fairclough. It has important ramifications for my research on consumption and identity, since, it is particularly relevant in relation to Bourdieu’s focus on the power of ‘symbolic violence’ operating through taste and classification, *cf* 2 (1.5).

As Fairclough usefully illustrates, study of the ‘orders of discourse’ enables us to identify paradigmatic ideological shifts. He argues, Habermas has identified a move from communication as oriented to ‘producing understanding’, to it being motivated by ‘getting people to do things’, notably things they may not want to do (*ibid.*: 6). Thus, the global ascendancy of neo-liberalism, economically and ideologically, and the attendant extension of the market into new areas of social life, including public sector institutions of Health and Education, can be registered in changes in their ‘orders of discourse’. To give a specific example<sup>98</sup>, in public sector workplaces, there have been significant changes to their language practices, alongside material and structural changes. Consequently, ‘learners’, ‘students’ and ‘pupils’ have become ‘customers’, ‘consumers and clients’; whilst ‘courses’ have become ‘packages’, ‘products’, ‘units’ and ‘pathways’. Thus, these discourses, bear all the hallmarks of a, “‘colonization’ of education by discourse from advertising, management, and counselling” (Fairclough *ibid.*: 7).

This concern with discourse as a constitutive *social practice*, and with its impact on macro-sociological structures, arises in Fairclough’s work from a critical engagement with the work of Foucault, significantly modified by input from Voloshinov, Bakhtin and Gramsci. He approvingly cites Foucault’s argument from *The Archaeology Of Knowledge* (1972) that ‘madness’ as an entity, or object of knowledge, was a product of a ‘discursive formation’ which constituted its own objects, *cf* (Fairclough 1992:41). Fairclough recognises the debt he owes to Foucault’s approach to discourse in two ways.

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<sup>97</sup> An important part of Fairclough’s conceptual inheritance from Voloshinov, words are specifically meaningful not in synchronic abstraction, but in actual diachronic dialogic use, hence in discursive events or utterances.

<sup>98</sup> Habermas conceptualizes this as the colonisation of ‘lifeworld’ by the ‘systems’ of the economy and state (Fairclough 1992:6).

Firstly, in relation to *the constitutive* or *social role* of discourse, Foucault cleared the way for analysis beyond the notion of discourse reflecting, or mediating reality. Rather, his work meant linguistic discourses could be seen as having a role in creating or defining reality (*cf* Saussure 3(3.2 to 3.4)). Secondly, Foucault's work, makes a key contribution to analysis by virtue of his focus on the relationship of discourse to power (Fairclough 1992: 38). Here we reconnect with the debates between Social Constructionists and Critical Realists in Critical Psychology. However, as well as acknowledging his debt to Foucault, he also recognizes, and is rightly critical of, the problematic aspects of Foucault's theoretical legacy. With respect to the use of Foucault within the fields of cultural analysis and social theory, he echoes many of the concerns encountered above. There is, according to Fairclough, considerable grounds in Foucault's work on discourse, to license just the kind of sequestering away of human agency, experience and ultimately subjectivity, which forms the substantive part of my critique of Culturalist work.

This shift to what is negative in Foucault's legacy, therefore, moves us on to conclude this section by briefly considering some relevant criticisms of other key theorists and their versions of discourse analysis. Fairclough clearly recognises what is valuable in the work of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), and their conversational analysis of classroom discourse (Fairclough 1987:13-16)<sup>99</sup>. However, he argues, their approach suffers from the major deficiency of being too concerned with the form or techniques of discourse. It is limited, therefore, by its narrowness of scope. In particular, 'a developed social orientation to discourse', is absent, and harmony is presumed. There is no sense of contradiction, or conflict, and of discursive processes being 'invested with particular ideologies' (ibid.:15). Hence Sinclair and Coulthard, 'fail to analyse discourse as a part of wider social processes' (ibid.: 20) or to link the 'micro' to the 'macro'.

Potter and Wetherell's framework for discourse analysis (1987), though wider, more sophisticated and far less parochial, also comes unstuck. Fundamentally, this is because of their adherence to a thorough going Social Constructionism. Such a profound anti-realism fails to deliver on the promise which their approach undoubtedly shows, with regard to the relationship of self-identity to discourse. Despite their focus on ideology

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<sup>99</sup> Their work focuses on the transactional structuring of 'moves' in classroom discourse and on detailed conversational analysis of the 'shared rules' for 'turn-taking' (ibid.:16-20) in discussion.

and the social shaping of the self into a ‘discursive’ ‘multiple self’ (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 95-101) and regardless of their opposition to ‘essentialist’ and ‘realist’ theories, whether ‘trait, role or humanist’ (ibid.), their analysis falls short of the mark. Potter and Wetherell aim to radically deconstruct, what they take to be the key suppositions underpinning humanist psychology. Thus, they too wish to challenge ‘the contrast between the individual and society, as natural pairs in a balanced dichotomy’, made possible by the “construction of the self as a ‘bounded’ ‘unitary’ and ‘autonomous agent in the world’” (ibid.: 101). However, paradoxically, I would argue, their analysis produces an overwhelming sense that meaning in discourse can only really be understood at the most particular micro level of the individual, rather than as a product of a continuous mediative dialectic between the individual and society, in the subjective terrain of the psycho-social.

Fairclough concurs, Potter and Wetherell’s analysis finds itself limited to rather narrow aspects of the ‘ideational’ meaning of discourse, rather than the ‘interpersonal’ or social dynamics of discursive practice which are important to his work and Billig’s. They offer, ‘a one sided *individualistic emphasis* upon the *rhetorical strategies* of speakers’ (Fairclough 1989:25). Thus, a research trajectory which begins with a positive focus on the subjective dimensions of talk, ends up abstracting utterances, in contradistinction to Billig’s, Fairclough’s and my own approach. The result is a rather arid series of micro level strategic encounters, understandable only as the working out of highly localised subject positions. Though at one level their theory is concerned with ideology, as Fairclough argues, ideology ‘does not fit easily with the predominant orientation of their book’ namely Constructivism (Fairclough ibid.). Hence their ontological assumptions which are firmly rooted in discursive relativism cannot logically sustain the concept, because of its relationship to an existent extra-discursive reality.

The problem with ‘relativism’, Gill argues, is that, ‘all knowledge claims are treated with skepticism’ and it ‘leaves us without the means to assert the existence of even the starkest of material realities.’ (Gill 1995:169) Thus Potter and Wetherell’s analytic framework, is ‘impoverished’ because of, on the one hand, its inability to locate real material structures, and on the other, because of its failure to consider the physicality of the body. They cannot therefore overcome the false dichotomy between the individual and the social, in order to get at the hyphen of the psycho-social - the embodied

experience of subjectivity. This is because they can't adequately theorise, as I argued in relation to Critical Psychology 3(3.4), the two entities 'the hyphen' abridges. Thus, in their flawed analysis the point is inevitably reached where we appear to be dealing with abstract rhetorical strategies differentially mobilised, not by embodied social subjects or agents who engage with the material world, i.e. 'real people', but by what Blackman (2001) referred to earlier as 'discourse users'.

Potter and Wetherell are ultimately hamstrung by their failure to theorise what exists in reality, beyond discourse. This problem manifests itself not only in their difficulties with ideology and the subject – but also with regard to what forms of knowledge, epistemologically speaking, discourse analysis as a research method can produce. In short, here, I refer to their approach to the 'topic resource' problem (1987:173). This is one of the crucial theoretical hubs on which the whole axis of the much more expansive and fruitful method of CDA turns. Potter and Wetherell's view of discourse is that it can only be understood at a local and 'performative' level. 'Discourse or social texts are approached in their own right and *not as secondary route to things 'beyond' the text* like attitudes, events or cognitive processes.....the concern is exclusively with talk and writing itself and how it can be read' (Potter and Wetherell 1987:160). [*my emphasis*]

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, I will reiterate the ramifications of these arguments for my method of critical discourse analysis. A version of CDA based primarily on a combination of Fairclough's work and Billig's approach to talk as utterance, and as social practice, will be deployed. After initial 'thematic coding' (ibid.:167) of the sample focus group transcriptions, as specified in 3(4.3), a *multi-dimensional analysis across the three levels of discourse*, will be applied. In particular my analysis will draw on the *textual* dimensions as specified above, and involve close reading and analysis of, the focus groups' discourse in relation to brands. It will include an analysis of lexis, wording, figures of speech and metaphors, as well as analysis of modality and mode of address.

This *textual* dimension will then be related to analysis in terms of both *discursive practices*, within, and across, individual and group discourse, within the framing variables of gender and class. With regard to race I have not chosen to divide up the groups ethnically. This doesn't mean I will be disregarding race as a factor in the

consumption of brands. Rather, my approach seeks to examine the subjective experience of young people as classed and gendered subjects. Within this framework I want, therefore, to examine how young black, Asian and other 'non-white' young people experience consumption - in relation to their class and gender location primarily. At this point in the process, in the context of the broader discursive themes emerging, the *dynamics of 'interdiscursivity'* and *'intertextuality'* will be examined. This will be carried out both in relation to the construction of discursive conceptions and categorizations of self-identity, in terms of self, group and 'others' and in relation to their use of, and disposition towards, branded goods. At the final widest level of *social practice*, contradictory, emergent and innovative words/'discursive events' and syntagmatic combinations of these in discourse, will be analysed. Particular emphasis will be paid to examining, not ironing out, dissonance and contradictions in discourse. Care will be taken to analyse ideological dilemmas and dilemmatic thinking, by drawing out the 'implicit and explicit' dimensions of thinking, as Billig (1988) recommends. By using CDA, in this manner, I aim to analyse the subjective experience of consumption of branded goods, and to elaborate on both the conditions for, and the degree of subjective agency experienced, when consuming brands.

This chapter has referenced many debates, in relation to epistemology, ontology methodology and methods. **Parts One and Two**, contextualised the orientation and design of my research project. I agreed with Billig's assessment of the theoretical aridity of much Cultural Studies work. As a result, I have committed myself in **Parts Three and Four** to a number of tasks, framed by the overarching aim of contributing to repopulating Cultural Studies. I have argued, this may be achieved, through a specific focus on the critical analysis of the subjective dimensions of culture, and in particular here, through an analysis of the psycho-social consumption of branded goods, amongst late teenagers. Finally, analysis of discourse, framed neither by assumptions about interpellation *in* nor autonomy *from* ideology, but which proceeds instead on the basis of an understanding of what Billig calls, the 'dialectics of discourse' in 'the debating chamber of the mind' may also tell us more about the contradictory nature of consumer consciousness as 'lived' ideology. Attention to consciousness, in all its contradictoriness, is something which, I agree with Billig, needs our fullest attention.

## **Chapter Four**

**‘Choice’, class, classifying and bullying**

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The theoretical terrain thus far – beyond the paradigms

**Chapters One and Two**, critically recounted debates within and beyond, Cultural and Media Studies, about consumption. As will become apparent, the findings of this research support neither of the major alternative paradigms of consumption. Thus neither Structuralist or Culturalist approaches seem able to adequately account for consumption. Nor can, what I identified as, the two closely related divergent strands of Foucauldian work on consumption - those which tend to emphasise either the disciplinary effects of 'technologies of subjectification' or the possibilities for subjective transformation, offered through consumer technologies or 'practices of the self'.

To reiterate, Structuralism, because it bears too strongly towards seeing the consumer as irrevocably bound to, and passively caught within, the ideological carapace of consumerism, will not do. It has produced some useful insights into the macro processes of power involved in constructing consumers. However, Structuralism's predication on the domination of consuming subjects reduces them to the objects of the controlling ideological discourse, and subjectifying technologies of consumption, reviewed in **Chapter Two**. However, neither will Culturalist views of consumption suffice. Thus, the characterisation of consumers as active players, who use consumption creatively for their own pleasures, appears equally incomplete. Here it is the tendency to voluntarism in Culturalist approaches which makes it inadequate. This inheres in its overemphasis on the concept of agentic consumers, exploring consumption, as a series of lifestyle choices, or in Foucauldian terms, as a series of 'technologies of the self'. Accordingly, Culturalist takes on consumption, particularly those of the postmodern variety, appear much removed from the discourse about consumption which unfolds in this study. This is so, despite the much more critically circumspect nuances of some of the approaches reviewed above.

## 1.2 Choice: symbolic violence through taste

Disembodied from the subjective dimensions of class and gender experience, these paradigms are unable to account for the day to day realities and contradictions of consumption, and its meanings for young people. Instead, a picture of consumption as a complex, ambivalent and corporeal activity emerges. Within this grounded everyday

context, choice is rarely easy. Rather, "choosing emerges as a socially risky activity marked by the affective, material and embodied consequences, of being shamed rather than esteemed socially, for one's choices. What emerges very powerfully in the results is something scarcely acknowledged in much contemporary work on consumption. These are the effects of being subject to what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic domination' and 'symbolic violence' (1986: 511) which, through the concept of 'taste', turn judgements about one's consumer choices into judgements about social worth. These adjudications are then registered in the pejorative rhetoric of popular class, gender and sexual classifications, types and stereotypes.

Thus the experience of choice and its consequences looms large for young people. In particular, the regulation of choosing through competence in taste is crucial. Giddens (1991:196) and others, (e.g. Bauman 1988; 1998; 2000; 2002: Beck 1992 or Seabrook 1988), have argued, consumption is one of the key social practices reshaped under neo-liberal restructuring. As a consequence, it has become the focus for ever intensifying attempts to 're-engineer the humanist concept of self-actualisation' (Giddens.: *ibid.*) into a wider, and potentially all encompassing, commodity sphere. In this, personhood tends to be subsumed and reduced to the concepts and categories of 'lifestyle'. Within this neo-liberal social context of the spread of marketisation and privatisation, choosing, surely the axiomatic act of the contemporary consumer, becomes a, if not the, key 'tribulation' of the self. It is this subjective experience of neo-liberalism which is the focus of this research. Consumers are getting younger and younger as a number of authors, including Klein (2000) and Quart (2003), have pointed out. It is teens, and tweens<sup>100</sup> (nine to thirteen year olds) increasingly, they argue, who are the focus of an ever sharper marketing lens. It is therefore the young in particular who are, as Rose puts it, subject to the requirement to choose as individual consumers and 'obliged to be free' - by becoming 'entrepreneurs of the self' - that is consumers who 'shape their own lives through the choices they make' (1999:230-231).

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<sup>100</sup> Quart (2003: preface) A total of \$50 million was spent advertising to these kids in 1964. Today it's \$12 billion for a market worth \$300 billion pa. UK annual 'Kids' conferences like IQPC 'Kid Power' reveal 94% of British 11-16 year olds can name a footwear brand off the top of their heads. The average monthly spend of teenagers on branded goods is £49 (preface).

These results, therefore, examine how " 'compulsory individuality', as Cronin (2000) calls it, is experienced and negotiated, given that, like its forbears, this version of the self is just as 'mythic', 'ideological' and 'doxic', following Barthes, Marx and Bourdieu. Furthermore, as we will shortly see, when the increased imperative to choose is translated into everyday subjective experiences of consumption, that tribulation has distinctly classed, gendered and sexualised ramifications. The very concept of 'choice' itself, so often seen as the benchmark of market and consumer agency, and guarantor of freedom, becomes deeply problematised. As Skeggs (2004), following Strathern (1992) and Cronin (2000) argues, choice, given its conditioning by access to material and cultural resources, and its inseparability from the concept of 'taste', warrants much more critical circumspection than it receives.

Whereas theorists of individualization and reflexivity argue that we are all part of the choosing process, Strathern demonstrates how choosing is a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world, dependent on access to resources and sense of entitlement to others. (Skeggs *ibid.*: 2004: 139)

Thus, choice operating through, and conditioned by, the specific materially embodied situ of selves, is always subject to class, gender, race and sexual power relations, classifications and designations. Because of this, the potential 'risks', material, social and cultural, which accrue and append to such an expanded arena of consumption, can never be anything but unequally burdensome and psychically stressful. Charlesworth, (2000) following Harré (1979), and Bourdieu (1986), also infers, 'symbolic violence' is inherent in choice because 'taste' operates to regulate 'class'. As a consequence choosing is a perilous activity in which, 'many risk far more from an already degraded position and confront hazards in which there is much degradation and loss of dignity with little or no opportunity for self esteem' (Charlesworth *ibid.*: 270-271). It is to young peoples' experience of the unequal burden and hazards of choosing, that we now directly turn.

## 2. Class and consumption

### 2.1 Class, status and anxiety

Discourse about class runs through all of the focus groups, suggesting anxiety about class position is fundamental to young peoples' choice of brands and branded goods. Bourdieu's argument, 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier' (2000:6) continues to form, therefore, an implicit and sometimes highly explicit backdrop to what these young people have to say about the choices they make.

Thus, for group **1.WW**, four young women from Walthamstow – three black and one Turkish - the words 'rich', 'posh' and 'expensive', in particular, reoccur. **CL8** argues, that if she wears anything by Versace or Moschino, she 'feels posh', 'posh in them rich in them'. **J10** argues, 'younger parents' especially, are under pressure to spend, 'to make their children look good.' Yet, these young women's experience of buying high end brands remains limited. They see Gucci and other up-market brands as, **J14** says, for 'the men that have got all the nice cars they're like for more them kinda people ... West End kinda people.' **J**'s discourse is gender and age inflected too, and the move to a broader concept of classification signalled in the figure of speech, 'kinda people', is important.

The lexicon of class continues in group **2.HW**, which was made up of five young white women from a Hert's Sixth Form. The words 'rich' and 'poor' are repeatedly used and 'class' itself explicitly appears alongside the phrase 'lower class'. Whereas with, **1.WW**, four young women from Walthamstow, for whom 'cheap' carried mostly negative connotations, for this group of more middle class young women - three of the five have parents in social class B (Professional) - they see 'cheap', somewhat differently. Though 'cheap' still has negative connotations and appears as shorthand for class related judgements about other people's choice of brands, e.g. as **J8** puts it, 'Gucci is one of those brands that puts people into classes,' they also happily venture their use of 'cheaper shops', for economy. If they can't afford a particular brand of clothing, then as **A** and **J15** put it, 'we're more likely to ... look for the same thing in like cheaper shops.' So again, whilst aware of what Lury (1996:45) calls the 'social positional' dimensions of consumption, they are prepared to openly declare shopping down to budget. Despite this, there is agreement with the Walthamstow women that, as

**A12**, puts it, brands ‘make some people feel that they are rich.’ Furthermore, though adding in terms of modality qualifying phrases such as ‘*you could say*,’ **JS13** points out, ‘people with erm *maybe* less money and stuff would want to like sort of prove to other people who judge [that they] have lots of money.’ Hence, again, the importance of demonstrating class location and of presenting a socially acceptable embodiment of this, through choice of dress, footwear, make up and accessories.

These young white middle class women demonstrate that their professed attitudes to, and experiences of, consumption are framed from a specific inference and understanding of their own class position. Thus, they seem to be quite explicitly looking up and down at other people, looking down at those they perceive as poorer than them, and up at those perceived to be richer. Whereas such looking down is mostly pejorative, looking up at the ‘rich’ is, however, also declared as a negative, on some occasions. Thus, **J17** condescendingly contends, ‘there’s a lot of fake stuff nowadays (T Yeah) and I think that some of the brands look tacky cos you just think I’ve got it and you know that they can’t afford it and they know you know it’s fake and it looks tacky like the Burberry stuff.’ But, this is followed by an exchange which reveals hostility to those seen as above them, in class terms.

**JS** ... For some people brands are like part of their life like rich people who like see brands and that and feel that they need to wear them it makes people happy but not for the right reasons

**A** Yeah some people like

**JS** they feel unhappy

**A** like to live their lives like that yeah  
around money

**T** That’s some people

**JS** Like money orientated

**T** Money orientated people?

**JS** Yeah

**T** Would you include yourself in that category?

**JS** No

Group **3.HM**, six young men from a Herts Sixth Form, also frame their debates about the consumption of brands through the prism of class. In particular, they reflect on the possible links between class position, consumer choices and taste. A lexis of class anxiety emerges which is found across the groups. This centres on the concerns they

have about their status in the social hierarchy, and how this may be indexed by their consumption of brands. The following words all occur widely: 'rich', 'poor', 'quality', 'fake' and 'cheap' along with the phrases, 'look wealthy'; 'high-class places'; 'everyday person' and 'your average everyday sort of person'.

Echoing the comments made by the women in **2.HW**, the status of 'real' and 'fake' Burberry leads to comments about class, in relation to consumption. Thus, **O7** argues, 'there is a division between people who can afford the real Burberry and people who can't.' 'The people who can *really* afford it are a lot of rich people.' **R** and **A7** agree. Underpinning these distinctions and utterances is a constant existential dialectic between hope of being socially revered or esteemed and fear of being socially shamed. In Veblenesque terms, the pressure is on to exhibit 'pecuniary decency' and so avoid social embarrassment. **B26** comments on 'the normal everyday persons who wanna prove their status by putting a good image across.' **A11** too, argues, those in poor areas in Tescos 'try and buy like the higher ranges... to try and make themselves look big but in the rich groups people buy just normal products.' **O** and **N17** assert, if you wear 'Gucci and Boss all the time...you can usually tell ...incomes.' Yet, **R** adds, '*I don't think* you can judge what a person is like from what brands they wear *just* like their income *I think*.' The modality here is important. It shows their discussion doesn't necessarily centre on closed, over simplified, 'I shop therefore I am' arguments (Benson 2000). Rather it's concerned with interrogating the tension between what choice of brands might or might not disclose about yourself and others. The importance of such tensions, dilemmas and contradictions, as identified by Billig (1988), is explored in detail in the next chapter.

In group **4.CHM**, three young men - two white and one Iranian, all Sixth Formers from Cheshunt Herts - once more demonstrate the centrality of concerns about class to young people as consumers. Much of this group's time is spent discussing if it's possible to work out another person's class position from their choice of clothing brands. Thus, **B15** argues, 'if it's to do with clothes yes the richer you are (T Yeah) yeah you would wear more a variety of Nike.' However, **C15** thinks, it's more difficult now, 'due to all the branding that goes on everyone's got the same like . . . everyone's got a pair of Nike trainers (T Mm mm) so it's hard to it's hard to think oh blimey he's got a lotta money'. But as **C10** puts it, wanting to show you have 'got a lotta' is still a big factor in

consumption. As **M10** explains, ‘if you spend all that money on a prime good (T Yeah) you want people to know blimey he’s spent that much.’

What is perhaps as important as the contradictions and complexities of the discussion here, with regard to the possible link between choosing and consuming branded goods and class, is less, I think, the outcome,<sup>101</sup> than the fact the discussion takes hold. Even, if **B11** is correct, and ‘the richer you are you don’t need to show brands anyway’, class remains a key reference point for decisions about consumption for these young people. This is particularly so when it comes to the group’s discursive rationales as to who is, and isn’t, likely to spend money on ‘prime goods’. Certainly, as **M** indicates, a concern with class and anxiety about location or social position in the hierarchy of consumption predominates. It indexes a continued general understanding that consumption remains incomprehensible without reference to class, in terms of access to money and economic capital, and also to the cultural capital which informs taste and facilitates choosing (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, **M17** insists, ‘it depends on the price of goods as well (T Yeah) how accessible it is really cos like the Nike trainers are more accessible to everyone and other things are like more expensive and to be able to get into that kind of thing you need to be in a certain like social circle or a certain job to pay for it.’

## 2.2 ‘Ugh’: Discursive aversion and social distancing

In group **5.HEM**, six young men, all FE students from Harlow Essex, continue the discourse of class, in relation to brands. They name both the brands considered inferior and embarrassing, and who their benighted consumers might be. Thus, those who might choose ‘cheap’ brands includes ‘skanky birds’; ‘hooligans’; ‘riff raff’; ‘Essex boys’ and ‘the poor’. Here, ‘symbolic domination’ mentioned above, and the crucial question of stereotyping in relation to class and consumption clearly arises. Skeggs refers to stereotyping as the symbolic power to produce and circulate socially valued categories of people created through ‘semiotic condensing’ (2004: 112-113).<sup>102</sup> One suggestive comment, made in this group, occurs when **B9** argues the proliferation of brands ‘makes people like *you* get snobby about your clothes.’<sup>103</sup> Returning to the specifics of which brands to avoid, analysis of modality is useful because it establishes the degree

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<sup>101</sup> Whether or not you can ‘tell’ class position from choice of brands.

<sup>102</sup> The link between the production of such classifications and branding is examined in the next section.

<sup>103</sup> The third person attribution of the class pejorative ‘snobby’ to others signals a wider aspect of discourse again taken up in Chapter Six.

to which participants' identify with, or are averse to brands. In the next example, Asda's house brand, 'George', evokes a combination of emphatic denunciation, mocking humour and melodramatic metaphor.

**B I wouldn't wear any clothes from Asda**

**O Ha Ha Ha**

**C or George**

**B George**

**P George Ha ha ha ha**

**All Ha Ha Ha**

**T Why not?**

**ALL HA HA HA HA**

**B I would just get shot**

What's clear here is that this group's aversion to George is a public response which emerges collectively and dialogically. Thus brand aversion appears an expression of group rather than discrete individual consciousness (*cf* Kitzinger: 1995). This illustrates a crucial point about the social function of discursive aversion through declarations of disgust. As Skeggs, drawing on Probyn (2000) argues, expressing disgust aims socially for 'permanent distancing.' Identification and public declamation of a disgusting object enables a 'distance to be drawn from it', thus 'generating consensus for middle class standards to maintain symbolic order' (Skeggs 2004:102-103). It is through such proclamations of disgust, whether about 'George', 'CK' or 'Hi-Tec', and the everyday discursive fabric of umpteen similar, and seemingly innocent small judgements of taste, that the bigger social canvas of symbolic domination is maintained, and social distance renewed.

This pattern of aversion and disgust as expression of collective taste, and thus as a powerful form of social distancing, occurs widely across the groups. Accordingly, in **6.HEMX**, one of only two groups with mixed gender, two young men and two young women FE students from Harlow Essex, **A7** one of the two young women, describes Prada as 'like really posh'. By contrast **A14's** modality is emphatically averse, '*I can't stand the Calvin Klein logo*'. Why is she so hostile to CK? Her answer reveals just the kind of concern to effect social 'distancing' which Probyn and Skeggs point to. '*I instantly think of like a market (J [the other young woman] Fake yeah) with ugh ugh loads of bags (J Yep) with that [CK] on it.*'

Thus, by uttering 'ugh', acceptable taste is established and social distance drawn from those who, it is implied, are beneath these young women in class terms, because their lack of 'standards' permit them to shop in street markets. This is followed by A, 'I don't like the Gucci one cos it looks quite expensive but then the Boss one and the Gucci one are like the real you know.' S14, one of the young men, adds 'Yeah I like the LV (A Yeah) it looks really classy.' But, A15 reaffirms her position with regard to CK, 'I wouldn't wear CK... I think it's cheap it just looks kind of tacky'.

### **2.3 Discursive objectification: reducing people to things**

In group 8.WW, five young women FE students from Walthamstow, their discussion is again marked by a vocabulary inflected with anxiety about class and taste. 'Cheap', 'knockoff', 'fake', 'real', 'nasty' and 'dodgy' all exhibit connotations which make little sense outside of an implicit concern with the dialectics of social standing and distancing. J9 argues, 'oh some people go oh where did you buy that top from if you go down the market they go oh you should have been in Blah di Blah shop you're just *being cheap* and having knock off'. The form of the verb 'to be' is significant. The effect of the combined tense and mode of address, condensed in the phrase, 'you're just being cheap', is to try to make the subject J, the object of the sentence. J, it is inferred, becomes the thing she has 'chosen' to buy, something 'cheap', 'nasty' and disgusting from which social distance must be drawn. Hence, this disparaging discourse infers those who buy cheap clothes themselves become objects - disgusting and worthless things. Such a tendency to discursively objectify others emerges as a constant thread running through the groups.

As I suggested above, what's most significant about this discourse is not its veracity regarding the links between consumption, taste and class. Rather, it is the continual framing of choices in relation to a hierarchy of class positions, within the context of the constant threat of social devaluation and distancing, for those unable to choose tastefully or who, following Veblen, can't dress decently. Thus, specifically here, J's anxiety not to appear to embody cheapness, and risk consigning herself to a position of perceived social worthlessness. Consumption of brands and, in particular, the dynamics of interpreting choice through what is seen as tasteful or not, clearly condenses out a set of powerful social and cultural anxieties about class position and perceptions of respectability. Perceptions of class and, in particular, of taste as an index of class

position, remain central to the experience of consumer choice, as the moments of aversive discursive objectifying and social distancing above, bear witness to.

### 3. Classifying

#### 3.1 'Skanky birds': semiotic condensations of class and gender

In a number of discussions across the groups the word 'skank' emerges as a 'semiotic condensation' of derogatory concepts of gender, sexuality and class. In group 13.HW below, J's anxiety, voiced in group 8.WW, not to be seen as 'being cheap', is shared by women from more middle class backgrounds. This time, however, that anxiety not to be shamed and humiliated, by being judged disgusting, is given a new slant by H's use of 'skank' as a synonym for 'cheap.'

H People don't like wearing clothes that are skanky

M No ha ha ha

T When you say skanky erm what does that what does that really mean to you?

H Well brands that are supposed to be brands but they are not they are cheaper ones and (M Yeah) people will (M Yeah) take the mick out of you for wearing them

Skank is, 'a derogatory term for a (usually younger) female, implying trashiness or tackiness, lower class status, poor hygiene, flakiness, and a scrawny pockmarked kind of ugliness. It may imply promiscuity, but not necessarily. It can apply to any race, but most commonly it is used to describe white trash.'<sup>104</sup> In one of the mixed gender groups, 6.HEMX, discourse about class explicitly meets gender with 'skank' emerging, specifically, as part of a cluster of terms used as the opposite of 'decent'. Thus, when one of the two young men in the group, D17, passes comment on the social advantages of decent brands, he elicits agreement from A, one of two young women.

D When you wear like a decent brand then you know that you're like wearing decent clothes (A18 Yeah) an you're not

A Not skank

What is significant about the use of the word 'skank' here is the way it brings together discourse about class with discourse about gender and sexuality, through the contrastive role the term performs, as the opposite of the class inflected concept of decency or respectability. For Skeggs, 'respectability' (1997:161-162) is a class infused category

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<sup>104</sup> Skank as defined by <http://www.urbandictionary.com> accessed 2.03.05 12pm. One needs of course to use such an unofficial and uncritical source cautiously, but the very assumptions built into the definition are precisely those commonly rendered in the discussants' talk

often desired by working class women.<sup>105</sup> It signifies they have secured themselves the socially acceptable identity and sanctioned status of 'decent' women. Thus across several groups, 'skank' by contrast, is used to describe some young working class women pejoratively. 'Skank' offensively links 'poor' and 'cheap' clothes brands to 'rough and ready' women. It objectifies them by reading key elements of their mode of dress, notably their choice of branded clothes and accessories, as signifiers for their lack of 'taste' and hence social competence, standing, 'virtue' and esteem.

Amongst another of the groups, this time the young men from Essex in **5.HEM**, 'skanky birds' are described as those that, put 'you in mortal' and who are 'scrubberish.' Therefore poorer young women, those labelled as 'skanks', who are identified as such because they are seen to dress 'cheaply', are deemed socially worth less; sexually easy and the 'contrastive other', to use Billig's (1992:156) suggestive phrase, of richer respectable women. As Skeggs has argued:

The classification by and of the working classes into rough and respectable has a long history: many attempts – often through religion – were made to 'rescue' white working class women from the clutches of non-respectability. To not be respectable is to have little social value or legitimacy. (1997:3)

In group **6.HEMX, J26** explains, she once had a 'Grebe' boyfriend. She describes dressing up in gothic black clothes and boots for a night out with him and his mates, as putting on her 'Sunday Best'. This is worthy of note because, even though self consciously sub-cultural groups such as 'Grebes', 'Skaters', 'Goths' and 'Urbans' were not the explicit focus of this study, **J** suggests, even among these groups the 'rough respectable' class axis applies. It continues to play a role in shaping both the subjective understanding of members of such groups as to their social status, and standing, and it also acts to inform how these sub-cultures are judged more widely. While the use of some brands, such as 'Vans' by skateboarders, clearly reflects a desire to signify group membership, as Leiss Klein and Jhally (1997) argue, such 'totemic' (ibid.:344) uses of brands doesn't always draw derisive comment from the media. Yet, 'Burberry' and its wearers have been the subject of much vitriolic symbolic violence in the tabloid press<sup>105</sup> especially. I will return to the reasons for this in 4(3.4).

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<sup>105</sup> The following are exemplary of the coverage of 'Burberry' in relation to young working class women in particular. *The Metro* 'Chessex The Posh Essex Girl' - June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2005 accessed at *The Daily Mail's* web site [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/femail/article.html?in\\_article\\_id=183097](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/femail/article.html?in_article_id=183097) on Monday 31<sup>st</sup>

The overall point here is that judgements of taste, made about choice of branded goods or the lack of them, feeds into these long established processes of social classification. Such adjudications, therefore, work to maintain and enforce contemporary social divisions, and sub-divisions, of class and gender. Choice of brands 'classifies' into 'rough and respectable', but such regulatory and ideological mobilizations, of decency and taste, operate in gender and sexual, as well as in class terms, as the semiotic and discursive condensations underpinning 'skank' so clearly demonstrate.

### 3.2 Gendered subjects: 'skank' or 'massively stuck up'?

A further difficulty for young women's negotiation of the ideological values, social categories and labels branded consumption evokes, is outlined by J26. She describes a man in a Versace suit as 'minted'. But J says, 'I dunno you wouldn't necessarily turn around and say oh like he's really stuck up and that like he's a horrible person but if you saw a girl like from head to toe wearing names like £300 earrings and stuff then you'd just think *oh she's massively stuck up.*' For these young women both subject positions on offer here are equally problematic. The 'choice' perceived is between being labelled a poor brandless 'skank' or 'massively stuck up'. J therefore, highlights the contradictory subject positions young women continue to negotiate through their consumption. Within a social order where discourse is still shaped by the classed classifications of persons into rough and respectable, and where so much rests on demonstrating and embodying social competence through taste, this is bound to create apprehension. As I suggested in the introduction, these young women face just the kind of dilemmas and tribulations of the self which concerned Giddens. However, as these results show, these are dilemmas in which the level of social hazard and risk is shaped by the specifics of class and gender location, and relations of power. This negotiation of contradictory subject positions is taken up again in **Chapter Five**.

With regard to the differential judgments which apply, in gender terms, to 'dressing posh' and appearing 'minted', this is a subjective dilemma which also draws attention to the limitations of arguments which have, as Blackman (2004) points out, stressed

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October 2005 at 11.45. On the same web page accessed at the same time, 'The Emperors New Clothes' from *The Daily Mail* – March 4<sup>th</sup> 2004 and, again, from *The Mail* 'The Year of The Chav' - 19<sup>th</sup> October 2004 - same site and edition.

gender 'detraditionalisation' (Featherstone 1990). Thus, J's arguments underline how young women from working class backgrounds, subjective options remain even more circumscribed than young working class men's. The currency of the word 'skank' itself, and the meaning of the word, as it appears in the contexts outlined above, highlights the persistence of 'traditional' views of women. These views, as articulated by the sexism of some of the men in focus group 5.HEM, are still present in the outlook of some young women too. These findings also demonstrate how 'self made' (Blackman 2004:230) post- feminist women are more likely to be middle class. This is because, the latter, will be able socially, culturally and territorially, to achieve some insulation from pejoratives like 'stuck up', should they choose to dress in 'names'.

### **3.3 'Rude boys Essex scum'? Representing and fixing class**

I19, from the Basildon group, one of three young men, raises a crucial point which shifts discussion of class into new territory by arguing brands 'help us to class ourselves.' This discursive movement, as we will see, raises important issues to do with the make up and role of social classifications, and the processes of classifying and stereotyping, mentioned in (2.1). As Charlesworth argues, the representation of class is a 'highly contested' and 'loaded enterprise' and a battle over 'symbolic instruments' which results in a vocabulary of class concepts, words and classifications which are 'located somewhere between euphemism and insult' (2000:168).

Before turning to these classifications of 'Essex boys and girls'; 'Rude boys' and 'Townies' I want to focus on one particular aspect of this representation. This is the rhetorical displacement and discursive fixing of class in place. As Skeggs points out, references to territory, to space, and place have in recent years increasingly been evoked, and deployed in the media, and more generally across official and popular discourses. She argues, this has been one of the means by which the impolite, politically and ideologically charged language of class has been discharged, displaced and effaced. In particular with reference to the territorializing of class, and in line with Charlesworth's 'euphemism/insult' discursive axis just noted, Skeggs points to the rise of 'Essex man and girl', as examples of just such rhetorical displacements of class, by reference to 'geographical positioning'(Skeggs 2004: 112). This takes place, she argues, as a part of the much wider processes of what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic domination' and 'symbolic violence' (1986), which I raised earlier.

Symbolic domination and violence, as I have suggested, operates in a number of ways. In relation to the ever expanding sphere of consumption and consumer 'choice', seen under contemporary neo-liberal conditions, they operate through class control of the category of 'taste'. Thus, 'those who have the symbolic power to make their judgements and definitions legitimate' (Skeggs 2004: 107) and to sanction their own 'taste', selectively appropriate, recode, categorise and devalue the taste of those who don't. In the terms of this study, it is those who have the least symbolic power<sup>106</sup> who are belittled and humiliated the most, for their taste and competence as choosers or consumers. It is through such symbolic violence that, Skeggs argues, class continues to be 'marked,' differences made known and 'boundaries drawn' (ibid.: 108).<sup>107</sup>

Within focus group 7.BEM, I, and his fellow discussants from Basildon develop an argument, which hinges on the possibility of reading what a group of people are like from the brands they wear. This objectifying discourse draws on the tendency to geographically displace class, into talk about place, and to fix or locate class as a condition, rather than a position in structural relations. Such a move encourages talk about the *types* of people who come from certain *types* of places. Hence as we will see, I16 berates 'Rude boys' as 'Essex scum'. Such talk also oscillates constantly from the euphemistic pole of the discursive axis, to the insulting, and thus from straight forward laughter to the repetition of the word 'Essex' attached to 'scum.' This hints strongly at how contemporary stereotypes are constructed, circulated and articulated as 'semiotic condensations'. Objectified groups of others, such as 'Rude boys', 'Essex boys' and 'Essex girls', work by becoming known and read through a series of corporeal cues and dispositional clues including choice of branded clothing and accessories. These choices are perceived as proof of membership of the category 'cheap' meaning indecent, disgusting or vulgar in taste and therefore in class terms.<sup>108</sup> The use of brands as

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<sup>106</sup> It is important to understand, given the discussion of ideology in **Chapter Three**, power doesn't operate in a simple top down manner. Rather as Gramsci (1971) argued ideology as lived is marked by a constant struggle for hegemony within and between subjects. Furthermore, Bourdieu's extension of ideology into the embodied realm of the habitus, means symbolic domination is characterised by the taking up of dispositions as well as ideas which perpetuate the domination of the dominated, by themselves. With respect to self harm in symbolic violence Charlesworth points to the damage done to working class kids' education by 'the ideology of giftedness' as Bourdieu calls it. Here, I think, the damage is wrought by the ideology of individual choice and taste.

<sup>107</sup> Clearly the mass media play a key role in categorising, valuing and regulating taste. This is because of the considerable concentrations of symbolic power amassed in the global media conglomerates or 'Cultural Industries' as Hesmondhalgh (2002) and Curran (2004), for example, argue.

<sup>108</sup> 'They' are thus following Bourdieu (1984), the rough, the unrespectable - the working class.

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‘totemic’ badges of membership for sub-cultural groups, such as ‘skaters’, means their representation can be described as being both ‘by and for themselves’ – since they use brands to positively identify themselves. But unlike these groups, those young working class men and women who are symbolically controlled and violated, such as ‘Rude boys’, ‘Townies’ and ‘Essex girls’, have these objectifying labels and social values attached to their taste and to their choice of brands, both ‘by’ and ‘for others’.

These classed classifications, semiotic condensations or stereotypes are, to reiterate, materially embodied at least in part, through the consumption practices of those that wear particular brands whether it be ‘Burberry’, ‘Nickelson’, ‘Hi-Tec’ or ‘George’ clothing. But through the processes of discursive objectification, fixing and distancing described above, the brand names themselves, as well as the logos and trademarks, come to act as shorthand or anchorage. Thus they act as key signs of the roughness and indecency of those who wear them, effecting a discursive objectification of those who are looked at, ‘by’ and ‘for’ the benefit of those who do the looking. Thus ‘Rude boys’, as we will shortly see, are seen and read as socially deviant types whose designation as undesirable appears embodied, and so confirmed, by their ‘tasteless’ consumption habits. Whereas Skeggs’ (1997) reading of Bourdieu tends to focus more on the symbolic struggles and process of domination between classes, particularly the inter class dynamics of symbolic domination of the working classes by the middle classes, the discourse below also illustrates something else. This is the intense intra class dynamics of how the ‘respectable rough’ axis dissects the working class also.

Thus in focus group **7.BEM** the discourse crystallises into the class of what, **A14** calls, ‘Rude boys’ a type of other to whom all manner of negative characteristics and traits are gradually appended and to whom the metaphor ‘scum’ is attached by **I15**. In terms of modality, **I16**, at first shows little or no modification or qualification of his statement. He simply repeats, ‘Essex Essex Essex is just scum.’ **I** then moves to give an explanation for his emphatic insults, and violent turn of phrase, which is based on contrasting his life in Essex with time spent in Devon where such ‘classes’, according to **I**, didn’t exist. The way **A**’s account of ‘Rude boys’ as ‘Essex scum’ also develops, and wins explicit approval from his friends, is instructive too.

**(7.BEM.14)**

**A** Yeah because you see these rude boys going around and you know you can determine you can see oh it's

**I** Yes you can tell what social class he's

**A** Social class yeah yeah

**I** But I don't think you can tell someone's personality though

**A** But you can see immediately if they're wearing a hat and everything

**I** if they're wearing a hat if their trousers are tucked

**A** You know exactly what

**T** Go on

**I** If they're wearing Nickelson

**A** What sort of person they are

**H** Yeah ha ha

**I** **15** then proceeds to outline what kind of groups, he believes, are associated with different kinds of brands, different types of clothing and ways of wearing them. 'Rude Boys' will 'only wear Nike baseball caps' whilst 'Skaters will have baggy jeans' and 'baseball caps which are not Nike.' 'Skaters', **A15** adds, will wear 'hoodies that are Vans or something'. **I** then sketches a portrait of these groups' opposing styles, in which the attention to detail is testament to the centrality of the intensive practices of looking, and watching, which are a common characteristic across all the groups and without which such classifying would be impossible.

**(7.BEM.15)**

**I** ... the difference between a rude boy hoodie and a skater hoodie (**T** Go on) or a Goth hoodie is that a rude boy hoodie will have a zip (**A** Yeah) a lot of the time seventy five per cent eighty per cent of the time a rude boy hoodie will have a zip down the front (**H** Mm and it will have Nickelson on) yeah whereas a skater it will have no zip so er sorry a skater hoodie will have no zip so because it's easier to put on

Returning to the classifying and objectifying discourses of branding, **I15**, crucially, **I** think, then moves beyond the specifics of the actual physical detail, the repertoire of what is worn in terms of clothing brands, and the ways of wearing them. Instead he isolates and makes much wider inferences about the meaning of 'Rude boys' disposition, or what Charlesworth calls their 'compartment'. (2000: 64-66) In

particular, he details the attitudes and behaviour of 'Rude boys', as 'Essex scum' incarnate. 'Scum', he reiterates, 'would be a good' word with which to describe 'Rude boys.' This statement is met with a wall of laughter. Following this H15 comments, 'they are the people you don't wanna meet on a dark night Ha Ha' to which I adds, 'when you think of Rude boys you think of groups'. This point in turn is then further elaborated on by A, 'Rude boys' are 'people that hang around on street corners'. In response to this I delivers his unequivocal verdict, they are 'arrogant'. Adding, finally, to the long list of allegations made against 'Rude boy Essex scum', H15 ventures, 'they just start a fight for no reason.' Two more key examples of the wider judgements made about 'Rude boys' appear below.

**(7. BEM 17)**

H If I see someone you see them dressed like say a rude boy you tend to think oh I (I Yeah) do I even want to go that way

I Yeah I've done that many times especially when it's dark

A Yeah it's the things that you associate with that

H Cos you see you don't see one you see a massive group of em

I Or you'll see one and you think right I'll keep going and you'll look around the corner and they're all there (A H Yeah) there's like fifty of you like and you think 'okay go back' Ha Ha

**(7. BEM 18)**

I Do you also notice when when you get mouthed off by a rude boy when you get mouthed off by them and you're mouthing off back instead of

A they'll come back with like sixty of em

I Instead of fighting themselves they come back with ten friends

H Yeah ha ha ha

I And they're like twelve of em on you and you're like I didn't mouth you lot off (H Ha Ha) I just mouthed him off ( I ha ha ) Cos he mouthed me off and they're like so he's our friend and the next day they'll be arguing

### **3.4 Stigmatising the working class**

What seems most significant about the detailed development of this discourse is not whether any, or all, of these assertions, and assumptions, about the dispositions of 'Rude boys' are correct. Clearly an element of hyperbole is evident. Rather, the point is to understand how and why, such judgements are being made. More specifically, therefore, they are arrived at through processes of 'semiotic condensing', which make some brands, the logos or signs, of social stigma.

I would argue, therefore, that a much wider set of social and psychic consequences follow on from branding as a contemporary marketing practice. Thus branding, which works through the concept of giving commodity objects personalities, souls and values, or as Lury puts it (2004:6), by injecting and attaching qualitative value to quantitative value in the global economy, also contributes to a particular form of symbolic violence. To be more precise, at the subjective level of consumption, a reverse process to that proposed by the same author takes place. This involves the detachment of human value from some classed subjects. Thus, 'Rude boys' are objectified here, as worthless things (scum), fixed territorially (to Essex), and socially distanced through the kind of aversion (Ugh Ha ha ha) seen above.

As a result of their consumption which is taken to be the key mark of their wider habitus and embodied taste, 'Rude boys' are devalued, negatively judged and classified, on the wrong side of the rough/ respectable and vulgar/cultured, class dichotomy. Hence to reiterate, a section of working class youth are therefore stigmatised and turned into a dehumanised contradictory mass which is both threatening and inert 'Rude boys... Essex scum.' This example shows the processes of consumer branding per se, by explicitly sanctioning and legitimising the proposition that people can be classed and classified into types of personality, whose self-actualisation is increasingly channeled through competence in consumer lifestyle choices, inflicts particular forms of symbolic violence, psychic stress and damage onto young people. The idea that brands 'help us to class ourselves' which was raised by 119, in group six, takes on a very troubling aspect when the means of classification are not equally available to all; when taste operates as a key mechanism for the reproduction of social distance, class boundaries and power, and when the experience of choice and its consequences is always classed and gendered in such potentially damaging ways.

### **3.5. 'Essex boys' and their 'Burberry hats' - The label as class stigma**

If we turn to look at 'Essex boys', a group closely related to, if not indistinguishable from 'Rude boys', the participants in group 5.HEM, repeat the themes of the previous group's discussions. Again, the role branded clothing plays in classifying, typing and stigmatizing some working class youngsters, comes to the fore. Despite the challenge mounted by the take up, of what was once an elite establishment brand, by some working class kids, Burberry is perceived as materialising and embodying yet another

class based stereotype. The reduction of choice and the potential for self harm, which results from the articulation of the 'Essex boy' stereotype, also manifests itself strongly. In group **5.HEM**, which was made up of six FE students from Harlow Essex, four of whom were white, one of whom was of mixed race and one of Chinese origin, discussion of 'Essex boys' begins as soon as the Burberry brand is mentioned, by **O20**.

**(5.HEM.20)**

**O** Ages ago when I first heard of Burberry and that to be honest I quite liked it like

**P**

Attractive stuff innit

**Mi** Really good stuff

**O** But now like cor imagine wearing a Burberry cap it's just like (**B** He he's) typical Essex boy

**ALL** HA HA HA

**O** And I'm not saying typical from Essex fair enough I'm from Essex but I don't

**B** Ha ha ha

**P** Don't wanna be lumped in with that

**T** What about Burberry then what do you make of Burberry?

**P**

It's too popular it's

**O** No it's just basically all over like it's kind of distinguished like with people with kind of like a couple of brain cells when you see someone with a Burberry hat whether or not they are you just think twat

**B M C** Ha Ha Ha

**O** Whether they might not be they might be a really nice person but with a Burberry hat (**B** I dunno) you just think a lary kind of small-minded person you know what I'm saying

What emerges from this extract is a discourse which in terms of lexis, or vocabulary, consists of a series of words and phrases associated with the Essex boy: 'Burberry', 'Burberry hat', 'typical', 'lumped in with that', 'too popular', 'couple of brain cells', 'twat', 'lary' and 'small minded'. Again these help to objectify, fix and distance young people who wear Burberry in the minds of others. 'Typical' infers an inability to act as an individual, 'lary' signifies loudness, a lack of taste or finesse, and finally, 'twat' comes with heavily gendered, sexualized and misogynistic overtones. Thus the stereotype of the 'Essex boy', and the 'Essex girl' too, as we saw in the introductory Chapter, comes packed with mostly pejorative and offensive class, gender and

sexualised inflections. Again these mark the crossing of the line between the ‘rough’ and the ‘respectable’.

Turning to look at the figures of speech used, ‘lumped in with that’ suggests, once again, being made a part of an inert class, mass, crowd or group; ‘a couple of brain cells’ connotes stupidity; whilst ‘small minded’ hints at the very prejudicial attitudes which are themselves being displayed by the Burberry boys’ detractors. ‘Too popular’ infers the snobbery of class distinction, whereby anything in wide circulation is condemned as for the masses only. What is interesting for my purposes is the way the Burberry brand, which was labelled as ‘cheap’ and ‘tacky’ earlier on, again comes to signify and embody this stereotype, and to stigmatise those that are seen to wear it. Thus the general concept of brands signifying personality, in practice here, seems to facilitate a widely held interpretation of the Burberry logo and trademark check as popular shorthand, or ‘semiotic condensation’, for the set of contradictory values and assumptions which symbolize ‘Essex boy’, as a popular class stereotype. As mentioned above, this is the ‘reverse signification or loglo’ effect in which the Burberry logo drains all qualities of difference and value from those who wear it.<sup>109</sup>

If we analyse the discourse in terms of modality, there are, however, moments of contradiction and doubt expressed here. The dilemmatic nature of thinking, which Billig (1988) argues is indexed in the richness of everyday discourse, is examined further in **Chapter Six**. Such a dilemma emerges strongly when **B** says, ‘I dunno’, and **O** says, ‘I’m not saying typical from Essex fair enough I’m from Essex but I don’t’. **O** is clearly caught up in a disciplinary dilemma, since he may well be judged by others from the point of view of the very stereotype he is discursively contributing too. To avoid implicating himself, he qualifies his assertion and defensively attempts to make clear ‘Essex boys’ are third persons or parties and, *he*, is not like *them*. Thus he declares in the first person, ‘I’m from Essex but I don’t’. The main point here is that despite **O**’s protestations to the contrary, and his explicit attempts to distance himself from ‘the typical Essex boy’, he implicitly accepts the destructive logic of the category, along with its deeply ideological essentialist criteria.

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<sup>109</sup> ‘Burberry’ here thus also effects a negation of Klein’s concept of ‘loglo’ too, the use of the signifiatory power of the brand, against itself, to deflect its spotlight or aura and to positively ‘brand jam’ and creatively resignify defiant or resistant messages. (Klein 2000: 348-349)

As Charlesworth (2000: 252-253) reminds us, the key point about symbolic violence is that, it involves taking on board and internalising ‘essentialist’ categories such as ‘thick’, (in this case the reference to ‘a couple of brain cells’), by those to whom such concepts often cause the most damage. Thus, with regard to this self destructive trajectory of symbolic violence, the chances are that **O** too, despite his attempts at defensive manoeuvres, may end up being read through, and subject to, the very objectifying discourse he uses against other people.

### **3.6 Townie central: quasi public spaces and displacing class**

In focus group **13.HW**, three young women from a Herts Sixth Form, the geographical designation and fixing of class tightens in focus from the County of Essex to the local level of the shopping complex. Here, in the quasi public space of the entrance to shops, the identifiably working class constitute a stigma, many people would rather not have to look at, and deal with, at all. However, the social awkwardness of having to see and share a space with ‘them’ can be discharged with some vituperative humour. This swings from the euphemistic, in the terms of Charlesworth’s axis of class representation, to the straightforwardly insulting and abusive.

The young women, from middle class backgrounds in group **13.HW**, in a way reminiscent of their fellow students from **4.HW**, spend most of their time looking down on others who they perceive to be inferior in terms of social standing and class. However, their invocation of class based stereotypes is not always straightforward. Once again it contains moments of contradiction and critical reflection. **M3** talks about ‘Townie people’ and ‘Townies’ as ‘the ones who stand around in the corners with Nike things on their trainers and drinking cider (**H3** Yeah that’s right) and with their baseball caps with their points up ... talking funny.’ **M3** adds, ‘they pretend to be black.’ **H4** points out they wear brands but they are, ‘well brands that are supposed to be brands but they are not they are cheaper ones and (**M** Yeah) people will (**M** Yeah) take the mick out of them.’ Once again for **B4**, ‘George’ and for **M4**, ‘Active’ are the butt of the joke, the cheap brands to be laughed at, but as **B** admits ironically, ‘ha ha I’ve got some of them’. For **B8**, the target of her disapproval, and disgust, are those she calls the ‘trend sheep’. Moreover, those who want the ‘most popular brands’ she derides as, ‘the type of people who just copy to fit in’.

In keeping with a familiar pattern across the groups, stereotypes around class are implicitly unpacked when the group discuss 'Essex men'. H describes 'the whole Essex guy thing' as like, 'I wear cos I have to'. M 9 says, they are the 'Townies'. Yet, as I suggested earlier, their discussion is complex. They both use these stereotypes explicitly, while at other times being critical of them too. Thus, B9 explains, 'Townies' and 'Essex guys' are 'like the popular stereotype,' 'lager in one hand and the remote control in the other'. But H9 asks, 'erm isn't that *Nuts* magazine?' and she wonders whether in fact 'men are obviously going to want to see naked women in magazines about football?' M9 replies, they will, if they want to be 'one of the lads.' When asked about Hert's men, B9 explains, 'they tend to be better like not half as erm.... mind you it's getting worse.' M10 switches focus to 'Essex girls'. 'Harlow has got [the] biggest highest pregnancy rate hasn't it?' to which H responds, 'Yeah' and B10 adds, 'Ha ha he typical'. Here, many of the elements of the popular stereotype of 'Essex boys' and 'girls' emerge, discursively through subtle, and not so subtle, judgements. These link taste to class through specific readings of 'townies'; 'Essex boys' and 'girls' branded dress and disposition, which are informed by the objectifying, fixing and distancing discourses identified above.

The modality of aversion to goods perceived as cheap, and the discursive role of expressing disgust in marking both social consensus and 'social distance', is again shown here. For H17 'Gucci handbags look so cheap' 'they're disgusting'. Even more graphically H17 declares, 'Burberry ugh ugh that's horrible'. The slippage in judgement of worth, from commodity brands to people, is an example of objectification which, I think, recalls the prescience of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. This occurred, Marx argued, when the relations between people were reduced to relations between things. It is spectacularly illustrated by M18's lambasting of Daniella Westbrook - considered the archetypal 'Townie' or 'Chav'<sup>110</sup> by many in the media - for falling foul of their standards of decency, and propriety, by dressing herself and her baby in Burberry check.

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<sup>110</sup> 'Chav' variously pejoratively designated, but including the illustrative 'Council house and violent' was not a term used by any of the participants in the twenty focus groups. It is however the preferred term of much media coverage of celebrities, from working class backgrounds, with whom some kind of Essex connection can be made. Thus former *East Enders* actress Daniella Westbrook and *Big Brother* competitor, Jade Goody, amongst others, are central examples of a category which seems an update or synonym for the 'Essex boys' and 'Essex girls', 'Townies' and 'Rude boys' discussed here.

**M18** ...Daniella Westbrook with her baby did you not see that? she had like a Burberry mini skirt on a Burberry top on a Burberry jacket and a Burberry hat and her baby had Burberry stuff on and she was carrying a Burberry bag to put her stuff in and a Burberry cover on the pram ... .. it looked ridiculous but the papers like really ripped it out of her

Expressing the contradictions and 'dilemmas' (Billig 1988) of whether to judge, in class and taste terms, as socially worthless those who fall into the category of the 'rough', **B18** argues, 'although it's wrong to stereotype ...if you see like three or four Townies up in front you know it's time to cross the road.' **H18** comments echo those of **I**, the young man from Basildon, who vented his anger on 'Essex scum' and **O**, the young man from Harlow who berated 'Essex boys'. Thus, **B** informs the rest of the group that if she sees a 'Skater wearing Vans' she thinks, 'cool' but, by contrast, if she sees a 'Townie with a Burberry hat on' she thinks, 'stupid.' **M21** describes as 'Townie Central' the area of her local High Street which, she says, is frequently populated by those who wear 'a large fake gold watch and Burberry ha ha ha.' This follows **M10**'s spatial location and fixing of the 'Townies' as 'The Complex Townies.' Finally, the level of insult intensifies as **M21** designates 'Townies' as 'Carrot Squelchers' and 'Monkey munchers'. Thus once again, as with 'skank', these young women's use of the derogatory term 'Townie' reflects wider offensive stereotypes, and the key role that brands play in such objectifying discourses.

Townies, social rejects who hang around in groups of 10-50... Males often seen wearing dirty, worn out Rockport boots, Burberry socks with luminous green Adidas tracksuit bottoms tucked into them, a Burberry cap and a Nike hoodie over the top (with the hood being worn up), coated with a can of lynx, the hair is gelled into a solid quiff, normally dyed blonde.  
<http://www.urbandictionary.com> [accessed 2.3.05 12pm]

Despite the important element of critical distance in these women's discourse, the saturation of their exchanges in a pejorative and offensive language of class judgement, about so called 'Townies', echoes the Basildon students' comments about 'Essex scum', and the Harlow FE students who mocked 'Essex boys' as 'Burberry twats'. These **objectifying**, **fixing** and **distancing** discourses, with their everyday quality, together produce, what Skegg's (2004) calls, 'semiotic condensations' - stereotypes which, as we have seen, are the results of judgements about taste, read in part, through embodied practices of branded consumption. Furthermore, the vehemence of such symbolic violence bears witness to what Bourdieu terms 'misrecognition'.

Thus the damaging effects of class structure are effectively and humorously (for some), neutralised, discharged and displaced, through the use of such classifications. These class representations, delivered via the rhetoric of geographical location, which veer from the euphemistic to the insulting, act as a useful discursive means to tacitly discuss class. In doing this, they disarm the term politically by omitting what is radical and threatening in structural conceptions of it. Thus the popular discourse of 'Townies', 'Rude boys', 'Essex boys and girls' etc helps render a laughing matter what should be a political scandal – namely the persistence of the class structure, with all its socially destructive and subjectively detrimental effects.

There is one final important point to be made with regard to the geographical fixing and displacement of class, through pejoratives, such as 'Essex girl' and 'Townie'. As Morley (2000:231) argues, 'the oppositions between home and abroad, staying and moving', have often been organised on class and gender lines. More specifically, in today's terms, 'sedentarism' has become the very poor relation of 'cosmopolitanism' (ibid.). In relation to the opposition between 'staying and moving', he draws on Clifford's assertion that this has, 'always been naturalised along lines of gender and class.' Thus, to the contrast between, 'the active alienated bourgeoisie versus the stagnant, soulful poor' (Clifford quoted in Morley ibid.), I would add something more. Namely, the opposition between the implicit entitlement to mobility, of the middle class women above, and the explicit fixing, and denial of mobility, attached to those they see as trapped in 'Townie Central'. I will return to this discussion of class, social worth, respectability and mobility in **Chapters Six and Seven**.

#### **4. Looking At Me – Looking Down On You**

Given the importance of classifying processes, in relation to brands, established above, and of the gendered and classed categorisation of sections of the population, which branding seems to encourage, the central role, both looking at yourself and looking at others, plays in consumption, is perhaps not so surprising. This intense concern with the visual and the scopic, with different modes of looking, is revealed as a rich seam of meaning within the participant's discourse and in their use of figures of speech, metaphors and other tropes.

The young women in **1.WW** are concerned about 'show offs'; **J19** wants to 'look good' and **C5** worries people 'just look at you and say'. Yet they are anxious also that 'people won't look'. **CL8** fears this, if she wears the same brand as somebody else. Thus a contradictory desire to be seen and not seen is expressed. Other women are concerned that 'younger parents', a widely used third person group, are pressured into making 'children look good' (**J10**), to show them off and make them too visible. **J18**, reports, being fed up with the boys who gaze at you and who always say to girls, 'ah look at your trousers ugh.' For the women in this, and the other focus groups, their consumer choices are still shaped in part, by an aggressive 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1989). This finding ties in with the persistence of 'traditional' rather than 'detraditionalised' views of gender noted above in the discussion of 'skanky girls' (Blackman 2004). I will return to the persistence of traditional social forms and concepts of identity, in relation to gender and class particularly, in the conclusion, as a part of my assessment of the work of Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) on reflexivity and individualisation, respectively.

For the five young women in **2.HW** a similar pattern emerges of both being 'the object of the gaze' and 'the bearer of the look', as Mulvey so memorably described it. (1989:19-20) Thus, **J2** says, of young teenagers another common third person group, 'they wanna look good in front of their friends.' Perhaps most significantly in gender terms, bearing in mind Mulvey's original thesis<sup>111</sup>, **JS6** argues, "when you look at the adverts though like that one [pointing to a Rimmel Ad] girls will think, 'oh look at the mascara whereas boys will think oh look at that girl.'" Criticisms are again made in this group of parents who buy brands. **J14** says its, 'just to make the baby look good like it's not for the child.' Developing her argument she explains, 'certain parents like treat like having a baby as an accessory like to carry [them] around in Gucci clothes or whatever.'

The women in group **8.WW** describe similar thoughts and perceptions about being looked at and looking. However, they also testify to receiving much more positive, empathetic and esteeming looks. **J8** explains, 'if your friend is wearing Nike trainers (**T Yeah**) you'll look at them and say oh I like those I may go and buy a pair.' **AJ8**

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<sup>111</sup> In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' first published in 1975 in *Screen*, Mulvey argued, that 'in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between between active/ male and passive/ female'. Women were constructed as images for the consumption and pleasure of men as 'bearers of the look.'

adds, 'it looks nice so you'll go and buy" the same brand.' By contrast **S9** recalls a very negative experience of being looked at which ends with bullying. 'People see like what you're wearing and people come up to you and say *Oh I don't like [that].*' **A16** adds, the thought of other young women looking at you when you enter a new situation, like starting Sixth Form, can be 'very frightening', 'you might get somebody with er that doesn't wear brand names and they come into the sixth form and they see all these girls with brand names and they might think like no (**RS Yeah**) I can't talk to her and stuff.' Finally, **A26** in **6.HEMX** explains, 'some of my friends they're from the Sixth form and you would not see them...but in a named bit of clothing like everything they wear is perfect and they won't wear more than one thing twice just in case they've been seen in it.' **J26**, agitated by this declares, without qualification, 'they're the sort of people that massively massively look down on people like me and they all do look down on people like me.' Bullying is dealt with further in the next section. Mulvey argued, 'the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure' (1989: *ibid.*). Here, in addition to the 'male gaze' my work uncovers a powerful class or classifying gaze.

Does young men's discourse suggest anything different about their experience and understanding of the role of looking, in the consumption of branded goods? **S8**, a young man from the mixed Essex group, **6.HEMX**, argues, if he goes out wearing the wrong brands he will get disapproving looks. 'Cos if you wear a tee-shirt and it's got like the wrong thing on it then everyone will give you a look like.' Alternatively getting the brand right brings rewards through peer approval.

**(6.HEMX.10)**

**S** ... basically they look at it and like say oh that's a so and so shirt and you're like yeah cost me like sixty five quid (**J Ha ha**) and I like like that I don't like bragging about it but I like to know like that I've got the stuff I've got like the gear

Despite **S**'s account of winning the approval of his peers through choice of brands and dressing decently, much 'male to male' looking remains hostile. Thus, the empathetic looking identified as a sea change in consumption practices by Nixon (1996:178-195) and as a 'homosocial gaze' by Mort (1996:72), is only borne out to a limited extent. Though there is plenty of evidence of young men looking at each other, and though sometimes this can be less overtly hostile, the accounts of 'male to male looking' in these groups seem best characterised as objectifying, competitive and disciplinary,

rather than fruitfully ambivalent. In **11.WM** for example, four sixteen year old men from Walthamstow, **O20** explains, 'There's a lot of people looking at you man (**T Yeah**) there's people walking and looking down on your clothes you get me'. **B23** describes the best response is to, 'big your self up' and **M23** elaborates, if you do this by wearing brands, you can really feel you are a 'top class person' and 'above anyone else'.

Amongst these young men there is little evidence of a more general transformation of the modes of looking, and the space to look, which Mort and Nixon claimed offered the chance to explore an expanded range of subjectivities, sexualities and versions of masculinity. Again, I will return to this in more detail in the conclusion. To conclude here, for both young women and men, anxiety about social position, value and worth, read through appearance and embodied in their habitus, or disposition, constituted largely through consumption choices, practices and taste, entails objectified modes of looking. Thus a classifying and objectifying 'class gaze' which involves both being looked at competitively and looked down on, and disapproved of - in line with the 'rough' versus 'respectable' axis of social classification - predominates. Objectifying, fixing and distancing emerge as scopic as well as directly discursive processes. Such modes of looking shape consumption in ways which again challenge ideas of individual 'autonomy', 'free choice' and 'free agency', as well as, theories of reflexive individualisation, as they have been advanced in both social and neo-liberal theory.

## **5. Bullying, taste and learning to consume**

### **5.1 Brands and feeling 'normal'**

In this final section I want to focus, more explicitly, on the emergent key theme of bullying<sup>112</sup> and how it arises in discussion of branded consumption. In group **1.WW**, which was made up of four young women, all FE students from Walthamstow, the question what is 'normal?' dominates discussion. When asked how they dress outside of college **J, C** and **Ty (23)** all state simultaneously 'normal'. When asked how they dress in college **CL** and **T21**, reply 'just normal clothes'. Additionally, brands make **CL17** feel 'okay normal'. **J17** elaborates, 'I feel good but that's how I am whenever trainers come out I always try to get them like it feels normal to me ... you spend £60

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<sup>112</sup> Bullying was explicitly discussed in seventeen out of twenty focus groups.

on a pair of trainers and you feel good and great that's just how I am with my trainers.'

A series of bullying scenarios, with regard to clothes judged as cheap are reenacted.

(1. WW.17)

CL You know some people like to make you feel bad

T Would they?

CL And some people well like um (T Go on) if you are wearing like cheap clothes and I'm wearing

T Cheap clothes did you say?

CL Yeah

T Yeah

CL Yes then I'm wearing cheap clothes they will say look at your clothes it doesn't have a name and look at me look at my clothes

Clearly the bottom line is that normal clothes are not those considered cheap.<sup>113</sup> In the next account, in terms of modality, the strong feelings of aversion and disgust which 'cheap' brands provoke, and which the discussants enthusiastically re-enact, is particularly important. The social marking, fixing and distancing functions of public expressions of disgust, noted by Skeggs and Probyn above, and their role in stigmatising certain brands of clothes, and the people who wear them, again, comes across strongly.

(1WW.28)

J Yeah cos I've had that that experience all girls do

T Yeah

C Like ugh ugh she's not wearing that init?

TY Yeah

J C TY Ugh ugh ugh

C Like she only wears cheap clothes

## 5.2 Social Affiliation: Little bags and friendship groups

The discussions which took place in group 2.HW, which was made up of five young women from a Herts Sixth Form, though not featuring the word 'normal' explicitly, still centre on what the group see as the effects of branding, and getting the brand wrong. One formative experience they want to draw attention to is that of being younger,

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<sup>113</sup> It isn't just cheap or unbranded clothes which provide a focus for bullying. Problems occur in relation to wearing the wrong brands, those which might mark you out as having ideas above your station or as 'massively stuck up' as we will see.

isolated and excluded socially, through being left out of 'friendship groups.' The general point about the linking of friends together and the display of friendship partly through owning particular objects, in this case 'name' bags, is illustrated below. As was noted earlier, this clearly shows the 'totemic' role public ownership and display of goods, especially those with brand names, can play in establishing and cohering group affiliation. As Leiss, Kline and Jhally argue, consumption is 'a public enterprise' and 'a spectacle' in which 'product images fulfill their totemic potential' by 'becoming emblems for social collectivities' (1997: 344).

**(2.HW.6)**

**A** ... if you haven't got a certain thing you wouldn't be in that friendship group whereas boys would just hang around in one big like group I think girls are a bit more like cos even just walking around em the school just like seeing year nines and stuff there's a set group and they've all got their little bags don't you think? (**JS** yeah **J** yes)

When asked to elaborate on the bad things about brands their discussion emphasises concern about the regulatory social control exerted on choice of dress by the need to fit into friendship groups. In these social circles, 'their little bags' whether 'CK', 'Playboy' or 'LV' act as, 'badges of group membership.' This entails 'self administered codes of authority' in terms of dress, appearance and, 'places' and 'rituals of behaviour' as Leiss, Klein and Jhally argue (op. cit.). This element of control, the young women argue, particularly applies to pre and early teenage girls. Thus **H4**, below, uses the metaphor for discipline, enforced medication and punishment - 'puts people into a straight jacket' - to describe how brands 'label' not only clothes but 'people', too. Thus it is pre and early teens, groups heavily targeted by the marketing industries, not just with specific messages but with the general proposition that brands have personalities or identities, which are a major cause for concern.

**JS**'s worries about branding, centre on the way 'years seven to eleven' form friendships, and on unease about which peers they mark out as worthy of esteem, and which they dismiss as worthless. Such judgements, these young women suggest, are often mediated by subjective understandings of branding. As we have seen above, branding is a marketing technology which is widely perceived as rendering analogous differences in value between brands, and imputed differences in value between

people.<sup>114</sup> JS and the other women in her group appear deeply anxious therefore, that those hailed and addressed as very young consumers, are being asked to judge one another's worth through commodified criterion of 'taste'. On the basis of the symbolic significance of the smallest nuance in the design of branded clothing, accessories and footwear they are, in Bourdieu's terms, learning to consume and to 'classify the classifier' (1986: 6).

**(2.HW.4)**

H I think that's the bad thing about brands they almost like take over like the teenage society (JS Puts people into straight jackets and stuff) yeah and certain like groups of people are recognizable it's like oh she's carrying a carrier bag and like certain stereotypes of people because of what they're wearing and because of what they've got

JS It [brands] label other people as well it's like having a label on clothes other people have labels... as well

**5.3 'Nike' for ontological safety**

When we examine the discourse about branding and bullying which once again emerges in group 3.HM, six Hert's men all sixth formers, the fear of being picked on, shamed and excluded shapes 'choice' and translates it into the desire to be 'safe'. As R22 puts it, in the second extract below, Nike can make you feel 'quite safe'.

O No I think that image plays a big part especially sort of primary school and that cos erm the better brands you it's probably sort of erm the more popular you are gonna be

R

Yeah it causes bullying and stuff a lot of the time

O Yeah

T Do you think that that bullying is much of problem?

R Yeah at school

O We're all taught though that it doesn't matter that brands don't make who you are but still though everyone will still buy brands but er [R Every one will judge you] no matter what we're taught we still judge people by the way they look and what sort of clothes they wear

**(3.HM.22)**

R I think that by going with like an established brand you're sort of quite safe like you can't get if you've got an established brand (T Yeah) if you're wearing

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<sup>114</sup> There is of course an element of third person distancing here transferring their own anxieties onto others but this only underlines the point about their apprehension since it suggests their concern is more for themselves.

well known clothes then you can't sort of get bullied because every one knows that's sort of like mainstream

R's comment above is, critical. Whilst the totemic role of brands is not in doubt, the tendency to conceptualise brands such as 'Nike' primarily as symbolic goods, to 'dematerialise' (Slater 1997) and to analyse them, as 'commodity signs', valued for their symbolic cachet or exchange value alone (Goldman and Papson 1998), does not explain fully how these goods are used and experienced. As we will see again in **Chapter Five**, the experience of wearing 'Nike', and other brands, is one which remains substantially somatic and materially sensuous. The young people in these focus groups do not simply buy logos. They buy branded trainers, tracksuits, baseball caps, bags and other items, whose 'use values' and 'symbolic values' combine to produce feelings of embodied ontological security.

Particular brands have a draw because, however temporarily and contradictorily, they offer something to wear in which you can 'feel at home', as one of the young women in focus group **18.WSM** puts it. They offer something in which you can feel 'safe' against the uncertain background of the street, town or city centre. It is this material corporeal dimension to the use of branded goods, which tends to be downplayed in the accounts of consumption given by Goldman and Papson (1998), Klein (2000) and Lury (1999 and 2004). In their work, as well as in the analysis of critical detractors, such as Lodziak (2002) and even Ritzer (1999 and 2004), this embodied experience of consumption, and its relationship to pre-cognitive and pre-epistemic perceptions of ontological security, remains largely unexplored. We will return to these embodied dimensions of social safety in the next chapter. When it comes to the three young men in **4.CHM**, from Herts, bullying again is brought up.

#### **(4.CHM.2)**

**B** And they bully you, some people bully you because you're trendy (Yeah) and say you wear Nike all the time and they say no you should think like some people who wear black like a grunger. They are going to be bullied

**C27**, from the same group, suggests branding is 'just a way of life', 'it's how we're brought up'. This is a significant 'discursive event' at the level of 'social practice', in Fairclough's terms (1992:72), because this trope highlights a contradiction. Consumption is *just* an everyday activity for most, but it is anything but a *just* in terms

of its importance both subjectively and objectively to the neo-liberal order, as I argued at the outset.<sup>115</sup> C continues, ‘we’ve always been brought up with it.’ However, this ‘way of life’, which, C12 argues, culminates in a state of affairs where, ‘we can be like individual now’, is achieved at a high social and psychic cost. Thus the possibility of being such an individual comes tied to its emotional other, namely an intensely experienced anxiety about being shamed and worse still bullied, if you dress too cheaply. As C12 puts it, ‘you’ve grown up with bullying and all that’. Learning to consume, as it’s recalled by C above, and below by J13, a young woman, and by S13, a young man from group 6.HEMX, is very much a school of hard knocks. But it is experienced, it seems, as *just* another inevitable fact of life.

**J** I used to get like bullied and cos I until like about year ten I didn’t have anything with names cos I couldn’t afford em I used to hate anyone buy me anything cos I was so careless that I would ruin it and people used to like be really horrible to me and that

**S** I used to lose stuff all the time so my mum used to refuse to buy me good stuff so I started getting a bit of grief for it at school my old man used to say get him some decent gear to shut em up

#### 5.4 ‘Nine’ for Shame

Finally, when bullying in relation to brands emerges in the discourse of group 8.WW below - five young women all FE students in Walthamstow – S’s account divulges something about the reality of the everyday experience of existential anxiety which accompanies being a ‘compulsory individual’ (Cronin 2000) and consuming subject. In particular, it also illustrates the humiliation of being on the wrong end of one of those ‘umpteens, seemingly innocent, small judgements of taste’, through which the bigger social canvas of symbolic class domination is maintained. It also reminds us of what it is like to be subject to others judgment through, the at times petty, often arbitrary, and yet also deeply ideologically embriated and inculcated, categories of taste.

(8.WW.8/9)

**S** People see like what you’re wearing and people come up to you say oh I don’t like like it’s not about them what you what they they don’t like it’s about you what you like and the things that you want to see erm or the things that you want to wear it’s not up to them what you wanna wear

**T** People are saying you shouldn’t wear this or shouldn’t wear that?

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<sup>115</sup> Thus the syntagmatic combination and juxtaposition of *just*, as in mere, with the substantial, as in *a way of life* expresses the contradiction.



Though it would be wrong to argue that branding causes bullying, it is not, I think, reductive to argue branded consumption appears to be a significant contributory factor to contemporary forms of bullying, among young people. By embodying anxieties about social class, value and standing, brands provide the visible means to initiate and sustain rhetorically, forms of 'semiotic condensing' (Skegg's 2004). The stigmatised figures of class stereotypes, such as 'Townies', 'Rude boys', 'Essex boys and girls', 'skanky birds' and others, constitutes the discursive terrain of social invective, pejoration and distancing, which surrounds consumption. Bullying, I would argue, can't be separated from this class and gender inflected symbolic violence, which, on a subjective level, appends to judgements of consumer taste. These are enacted in the daily moments and rituals of mickey taking, humiliation and exclusion of those perceived to be 'cheap', 'skanky' or 'trash'. These findings take issue with those, such as Nixon and Mort, who view consumption primarily as symbolic, and marked by increasingly enabling possibilities for the expression of self-identity. This is because there can be few experiences which are more embodied, constraining and distressing to the self, than being humiliated, shamed, socially excluded and bullied, for one's choices and taste. Bullying which pervades the world of work also, it seems, plays a key role in the subjective experience of learning to consume. These results show, learning to consume can exact a high emotional cost. They also highlight, therefore, the importance of the 'emotional economy' (Seidler 1996) surrounding consuming brands, which I will deal with in more detail in **Chapter Six**.

At this point, I think it is important to recognise the difficulties faced by young men and women such as 'S' from Walthamstow, and 'J' and 'S' from Essex, when they discussed the emotional aspects of consumption. Charlesworth (2000) describes the conflicts he felt carrying out interviews with working class people in Rotherham. He describes the sense of 'unease' he felt about subjecting his interviewees to 'systematic, co-ordinated, talk about particular aspects of life which brought back too many of the ghosts that haunt so many working people' (ibid.:137).<sup>116</sup> Clearly the power relations of educational forms of 'symbolic domination' had to be negotiated in my work too. This was particularly true given that many of the young people in the groups spoke out about their experiences of humiliation, and bullying. They needed therefore, to be able to do

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<sup>116</sup> The richness of his material is testimony to his successful negotiation of these difficulties.

this, in as supportive an environment as possible. As a former FE lecturer, I was acutely aware of the disparity in power between myself, and the research participants. This threatened to reduce the sessions to a formal dialogue between myself and individual members of the groups, if they were not handled sensitively.

Though my task was perhaps easier than Charlesworth's, because of the conscious decision I made to use focus groups, which, as I pointed out in 3(4.2), *can* encourage open horizontal exchange between group members, this depended on handling them 'appropriately'. I want, therefore, to say something briefly about 'appropriateness' by explaining my approach to group facilitation. Charlesworth argues that successful interviewing requires a 'sensitivity' which is not only 'epistemic', or a matter of a knowing abstractly, and theoretically, what is needed in the research situation. Rather it requires a 'sensitivity' which is much more complex, which has to be worked at and subjectively embodied: 'one's understanding of ontology must be practically realised in one's own comportment. One needs to be able to assuage a whole range of anxieties in order to be able to carry out an interview' (ibid.: 136). I think to a significant extent I was able to, 'assuage anxieties' because of the similarities between my social experience and that of those who took part - in particular my working class background. This, together with my experience of teaching, disaffected and socially alienated young people, meant I was able to practically realise the kind of bodily 'hexis' (Bourdieu 1984) or comportment which encouraged discussion, including discussion of difficult feelings and emotions. Thus a degree of ontological security and comfort was fostered by the various elements of our shared disposition. The focus groups worked because of the degree of ontological complicity established in them. Appropriateness and sensitivity, embodied dispositionally, helped make the groups relaxed enough to be practically effective and productive. This meant, as Charlesworth explains, the participants felt safe, 'instituted' and 'authorised, to speak' (2000:143), even when their experiences were negative and in conventional terms, socially embarrassing.

In the introduction to this chapter, I argued, the widening sphere of consumption was the key characteristic of neo-liberal societies. Today, in a deeper subjective sense, this means young people are rarely if ever addressed as anything but consumers. The emergence of the negative set of subjective ramifications to neo-liberalism, detailed above, is clearly linked to the shift towards 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin

2000:279). In a social order which, in Bourdieu's terms, is marked by 'symbolic violence', applied to those who have the least culturally and materially, by those who have the most, young people's experience of consumption is marked by the unequal burden and social, and emotional, hazards of choosing. If, as Bauman argues, we are witnessing 'the disposability of humanity' (2002:63) and the reduction of social life to a game of exclusion, then branded consumption, clearly, plays a part in this. When examined holistically, in all its material, embodied, psychological and ideological dimensions, these young people's subjective experience of branding reveals much that is questionable about consumer societies. This is particularly so in relation to the under theorised concept of 'choice' and its consequences (*cf* Slater 1997).

This chapter has traced the trajectory of discursive and scopic objectifying, fixing and social distancing, and the role these constraining dimensions play in shaping choice and 'taste' in brands. It has outlined the key role branded dress and accessories play as anchors for stigmatic 'semiotic condensations', or class stereotypes, such as 'Essex boys' and 'girls.' **Chapter Five** continues this work by examining the space for agency through consumption, and the subjective dilemmas and contradictions in consciousness it throws up.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Shaping The Consuming Subject Identifying and dis-identifying**

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Beyond the passive or active consumer

In the previous chapter we saw how choice, rather than being about individual autonomy for young people, involved instead negotiating a series of constraints which shaped their decisions about which brands to buy, consume and display. There were, I argued four major inter-related dimensions of constraint. Firstly, the classificatory totemic qualities and fetishistic dimensions of branding. Secondly, the tendency for judgements about class position, social value and worth to be made in relation to choice, and taste in branded goods. Thirdly, judgements about taste drew on popular discursive classifications, 'semiotic condensations' and stereotypes, which divided people into the 'rough' and 'respectable' in class, gender and sexual terms (Skegg's 1997). Fourthly, intensified scopical practices of looking also formed part of young peoples' experience. Thus in overall terms, knowing how to look was at the core of their ability to demonstrate, embody in themselves and discern in others, the cultural competence to choose tastefully, so as to maintain respect and decency socially.

The shaping effect of these dimensions on 'choice' suggested there are major gaps in contemporary accounts of consumption. Indeed, both the concept of the sovereign consumer exercising 'free choice' and its all too close relative, the post-modern playful shopper, encountered in **Chapter One**, appeared wide of the mark in their optimism about consumer agency. This chapter engages further with this deficiency. It focuses on the possibilities young people perceive exist for self-expression, through consuming brands, and on the degree of critical reflexiveness they exercise about the habits, practices and processes which make up their consumption. The previous chapter emphasised the disciplinary constraining dynamics of consumption. It foregrounded how marketing techniques can position teenagers as consuming subjects, with dispositions towards brands based upon the categories, or types of persons, that brands were associated with. The key precept informing and ordering these dispositions was an intense awareness of class position, with brands acting as pointers to young people's place in the social hierarchy. These status 'distinctions' (Bourdieu 1986: 56), as

adjudications of taste and choice, articulated a series of ideological assumptions in relation to subjective perceptions of class, gender and sexuality.<sup>117</sup>

**Chapter Four** drew attention to how the participants strove to buy some brands, and avoid others, because they argued 'brands' or 'names' helped fix concepts of identity and types - 'they help us to class ourselves'. This chapter by contrast focuses on moments of 'dis-identification' (Skeggs 1997:74-75) with brands, and their associated typologies of taste and values. The frame of reference widens to address the extent to which they do their own thing with, beyond and against brands. It outlines the extent to which they dis-identify, as well as identify, with brands and the ideologically saturated discourse of status distinctions, social categories and values they articulate.

However, rather than switching from stressing disciplinary control, or interpellation of consuming subjects, to agency and voluntarism in consumption, the analysis of the findings instead reveals a rich complexity in both the perceptions held about, and uses made of brands. It will be my contention that both ideologically, in terms of the ideas the discussants have about brands, and practically, in terms of the everyday embodied uses they speak of putting brands to, their consumption is marked neither by subjectification nor resistance. It is not about 'being really free' or 'really manipulated', (Slater 1996: 59). Rather an intricate but distinctly formed discursive, embodied and so dispositional terrain emerges. This challenges the simplistic categories and reductive short hand of the 'active' versus 'passive' subject paradigms, reviewed earlier. In mapping this terrain a discernible topography of dispositions towards brands emerges. In this, inter-relationships between discourses are common, and contradictory ideological viewpoints arise out of the dilemmas presented by consumption, as a key 'tribulation of the self' (Giddens 1991). More specifically such dilemmas arise from the gap between the expectations and actual experience of branded goods; from engagement with conflicting expert knowledges and from awareness of competing ideological takes on identity, the nature of the self and consumption.

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<sup>117</sup> With regard to 'race', **Chapter Six** deals with how social acceptability for young black men and women, is inflected and shaped by consideration of class and social position. Thus they draw on the same 'rough/respectable' axis, discussed in the previous chapter, to explain who is, and isn't, socially 'decent.' Cf 6 (2.4)

The six 'dispositions', I identify here, are the **Submissive, Appreciative, Practical Critical, Creative, Ironic and Radical Critical**. They are 'dispositions' because an approach which just dealt with talk and thoughts about consumption would be inadequate. A major part of the argument I've made so far, addresses, what I see as, the deficiencies of positions which stress agency and reflexivity, in human practices, without an adequate appreciation of the social location of agents as embodied, classed and gendered subjects. Disposition is used because young peoples' relationship to brands isn't just cognitive, i.e. about ways of thinking about brands - though this is important. Rather, following the work of Bourdieu (1984) and Merleau Ponty (1976) (1981), as well as more contemporary input from Charlesworth (2000); Harvey (2000); Entwistle (2000); McNally (2000) and Blackman (2001), the concept of disposition signals an orientation to branded goods which includes embodied practices. Thus, the term encompasses how clothes are worn and ways of changing their look and feel, as a part of, what Heidegger calls, our ways of 'being in the world' (1962). Disposition covers this fine mix of conscious opinions and pre-conscious perceptions as well as ways of acting with, through, and against brands. Recalling Merleau-Ponty, 'there were many ways for consciousness to be conscious' (Charlesworth: 2000: 78), Entwistle argues, 'the body is not merely a textual entity produced by discursive practices, it is the active and perceptive vehicle of being' (2000:28).

Despite this emphasis on bodily perception, that the body is 'not just an object in the world' but helps to form our 'point of view on the world' (Merleau Ponty 1976: 5), the six dispositions include ideas expressed in discourse. However, though these ideas are patterned, they are not tidy consistent opinions or fixed attitudes. This is because as Billig argues, (*cf* **Chapter Three**) 'thought is dilemmatic' (1988: 8-9). We hold contradictory ideas since opinion reflects the range of conflicting positions in wider social circulation. As will become clear in these findings and in the conclusion, the actual mix of this 'Kaleidoscope' of opinions, their 'implicit and explicit' 'themes and counter themes' (Billig 1988: 21-24), and their related embodied practices, provide a useful insight into the extent to which young people critically reflect on, are creative with and resistant to, branded consumer culture.

## 1. 2 Six key dispositions towards brands and branding

The first, **Submissive** disposition, is made up of feeling pressured, resigned or wanting to give in to a feeling of having to buy a particular brand. This may be done to compete with others or to be the first to wear something so as to gain esteem and praise from peers. The submissive orientation indicates a degree of acceptance that, unless you buy what you think others will approve of, you fear being shamed and left out socially. Though some young people derive pleasure from this loss of control, 'giving in', in the manner of Featherstone's 'controlled decontrol' (1991:126), can bring great unease. It is an experience shaped by class and gender position.

This submissive feeling was highlighted earlier. We heard it in the anxiety expressed about walking the streets in the right brands in order to 'fit in'. A5 a young woman from Herts explained, sometimes I think, 'oh I ought to get it too.' Submission entails moments of acceptance of subject positions advanced in marketing discourse, that you are what you wear and consume. This disposition can contribute towards a fetishistic view of commodities, in Marxist terms, in which social relations between people appear as relationships between things, as people are defined by the objects they possess. However, discursively what's expressed is not a neat and simple 'attitude'. Thus the anxiety which forms part of this disposition can be the precursor to contrary positive feelings associated with contemplating the pleasure of buying and fitting in. However these feelings of pleasure can rebound also.

The second emergent disposition, **Practical Appreciation**, centres on commending brands. It is related to the first in that 'fitting in' again features. But here people feel more positive, affirming the pleasure taken from brands. Brands are positively valued in terms of the social and cultural capital accrued from their consumption. They are seen as vouchers for 'normality', 'badges of membership' (Klein Leiss and Jhally 1997) and indices of respectability. They positively indicate similarity to others, acting as benign versions of the logo as malign symbolic social shorthand, examined earlier. Brands are praised for offering the chance to blend in socially, and for enhancing the chances of joining peer networks. As R15, in 17.WSW, puts it, they allow us 'to feel more of a collective'. This **appreciation** and pleasure is indexed by the modality of statements made. One woman explains she 'loves' Luis Vuitton bags. Invested with such positive feelings, LV helps to mark her class and gender 'habitus' (Bourdieu

1986:170). Choosing acceptable brands offers her feelings of embodied ontological security through the display of local cultural competency. Thus brands are appreciated for offering visible, social positional markers and for displaying for others, 'distinction' in taste (Bourdieu 1986). **Practical Appreciation**, however, also contains its negation. A dilemmatic space opens up discursively, in which counter points reside as 'seeds' (Billig 1988:17). This space can grow dialogically. For example, consideration of the worth of 'real' brands compared to 'fakes' can lead to wider questioning of their value, cost and conditions of manufacture. Pleasure taken from 'distinction' may lead to snobbery through objectifying, fixing and social distancing. But there may also be concern for those stereotyped for their taste.

The third, **Practical Critical** disposition, is marked by pragmatism, regarding the impact larger brands have on price, choice and competitiveness. Concerns are raised about the availability of lesser known alternatives and the overwhelming of smaller businesses by large conglomerates, particularly in the fashion industry. With regard to social and cultural capital, criticisms are made that some people are, 'left out of groups' or, 'looked down on' because they appear to fit the branded stereotype of being 'skank' or 'trailer trash.' However these criticisms, whilst defending the advantages of branding, may go further than just pragmatically accepting the status quo and take on a much more critical distance. The fourth, **Practical Creative**, disposition attempts to practically negotiate, in embodied action as well as thought, the obstacles faced to dressing for comfort, confidence and to positively express yourself. A range of tactics can be deployed, from thrifty budgeting, to combining a small number of designer clothes, with non-name brands, to customizing and repairing so that, as we will see in more detail later, a little style goes a long way.

Another response to the dilemmas of consumption, the pressure to show off, set against anxiety about dressing 'too high' or 'low', is humour. The fifth, **Critical Ironic**, disposition emerges from a growing awareness of the contradiction between the benevolent and malevolent aspects of branding. As Y7, a young man in [18.WSM] puts it, 'the good things are the bad things.' Showing you don't take yourself too seriously, and that you can use brands critically and ironically, is another way of negotiating these scopic and classificatory disciplinary effects. Self deprecating humour, in admissions about habits and obsessions, is shared with other group members. It is apparent too in

the applause for those who try to avoid brands and the praise for those who ironically take up unfashionable brands as their 'signature' brands.

The sixth, and final, **Radical Critical**, disposition emerges as a more thorough set of criticisms. Brands are attacked for restricting plurality and choice. Further criticism is made of their human rights records, and the sweated labour that make branded goods for the global giants. Nestle is one multinational which is condemned for dumping powdered milk. Other corporate brands are denounced for their alleged association with racism and Nazism. The limits to the **Radical Critical** disposition, and the contrary points expressed, draw on the **practical critical** disposition. Typically the big corporations and their brands are seen as too strong to unseat. Branding is seen as an 'addiction' or 'way of living', as one of the discussants puts it, and that if 'you don't' buy them 'someone else will'. As one young man argues, 'it's a capitalist world.'

However, in its most developed form, some proponents of radicalism are clearly moving towards a more socially and politically subversive orientation. Such a disposition is evidenced by a discursive stance which dispenses with pragmatic type defences of corporate brands' through such familiar 'adages' (Billig 1992) as, 'at least they have jobs'; 'the work would just go somewhere else' and, 'they [the Corporations] need the money to develop new products'. This insubordinate, proto-revolutionary ideological discourse rejects the notion that designer labels increase individuality, self expression and difference. Instead similarity is seen to result from the dominance of the corporate commercial imperative.

Finally, some young people imagine a future without brands in which logos or commodity signs can no longer be used to 'semiotically condense', 'objectify', 'fix' and 'distance', classed and gendered categories of people. As M26 in [18.WSM] puts it, one day 'pink won't be a girl's colour.' But here, as elsewhere, contrary themes emerge, evidencing the continuing ideological dilemmas consuming brands provoke.

## 2. Emergence and development of the six dispositions

### 2.1 Submissive 'I ought to get that too'

The subjectified or **submissive disposition** can be seen across the focus groups. In [17.WSW], five young women, all sixth formers from Walthamstow, the pressure to comply, buy and judge by brands, is clear. **N15** argues, sometimes you must conform and fit in. **A5**, a young woman from group [2.HW], five young women from Herts, also makes a similar appeal.

**N** ... it's more a case like someone will get it another person will get it then you'll see like everyone will do the same thing (**E** The same like) yeah feel you feel like like oh 'I ought to get it too' because you know I have to fit in

**A** You often like can almost be pressurized into buying it cos it's like on the telly in magazines and that's probably like the reason sometimes why it is in schools cos people are magazines (**JS** reading) and stuff (**JS** in the media an stuff) yeah in the media definitely it's almost as if buy this you can be like a certain type

In group [19.WSW], five women all sixth formers, two black, one mixed race - one Albanian and one Turkish Kurd - a similar position emerges when the question of whether you can tell what a person is like from the brands they choose, is discussed. After challenging the view that judgements are possible, **J33** argues, people who do judge others by their appearance and clothing never affect her. What is significant here is the way that, despite J's explicit arguments to the contrary, the logic implicit in her underlying reasoning conflates identity with image.

**J** ... .. in primary schools (**T** Yeah) and secondary schools there's always that person that has every thing that (**S** Yeah yeah) can be like oh yeah nuh nuh people like that have never affected me ... my self-esteem is never touched by people like that (**S** Yeah) they are very sad (**S** Yeah) but there is people that it affects a lot cos they're wearing the best designers but then they will still feel they are not quite good enough (**TI** Yeah) cos they don't wear it right

Feeling good about oneself, **J33** argues, isn't simply about buying the right brands of clothes. It comes down to the deeper more embodied manner in which they are worn. Thus J's discourse, though explicitly critiquing the notion you are what you wear, contradictorily carries a strong implicit defence of it. Billig argues, this dilemmatic aspect of thinking is often overlooked because, 'balance theories suggest that people will avoid thinking for internal disharmony is uncomfortable' (1989:20). Here and elsewhere, we can see 'implicit meanings going beyond the overt intentions of the

communicator' (ibid.: 22), as common sense discourse combines 'thesis and antithesis' (ibid.:24). These young women also demonstrate the discursive subordination and distancing of others. Displaying the snobbery which pervades acceptance of an analogous hierarchy between qualities of goods and qualities of people, central to marketing concepts of distinction,<sup>118</sup> they discuss the social need to avoid some brands. S, J and L agree on the need to distance themselves from the 'reverse loglo effect', which as we saw contributes to stigmatising 'the rough' in class terms. As an aura of class abjection bathes 'Hi-Tec' and 'Diadora', they agree you must avoid these brands or hide them from public view.

**S** It's just the fact of hiding the label

**J** Yeah ha ha ha that's it

**S** It's like you

**T** So why why Hi Tec and Diadora then?

**S** I dunno it's just like I don't know it's just seen as

**L** It's just got this trailer trash look innit you just see like trailer trashy people wearing them ***too bad but it's true***

**S** Yeah it's just like it's the people that come innit as well (J Mm) it's not really (Indecipherable word) they are really bad

**T** Who are the people then?

**S** Just broke down people

However, referencing both the concept of ideology as involving layered or dual consciousness (Gramsci 1971), and what Billig sees as the 'ideological dilemmas' which are the key to understanding thought and talk, their subjectified explicit discourse also contains the 'seeds' of an implicit contrary discourse. L's initial statement forcefully and explicitly condemns those who wear Hi-Tec as, 'trailer trashy people.'<sup>119</sup> But the dilemmatic cliché, '***too bad but it's true***' follows, modifying and distancing her from her first statement. S's discourse shows this same dilemmatic quality. 'Trailer trash', she agrees, are 'really bad' but when asked to elaborate she explains sympathetically, they are, 'just broke down people.'

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<sup>118</sup>Thus between elite, premier, mass and budget brands and lifestyles.

<sup>119</sup> Again as Skeggs (2004) argues, 'trailer trash' is exemplary of the trend to manage the discourse of class, particularly in the US context where the concept of class has an even lower political profile than in the UK. Such displacing of the terminology of class which we examined in the previous chapter, and which we can see again here, thus follows the objectifying and fixing processes we identified there, and the category works in similar, though not identical, way to 'Essex boys'; 'Essex girls' and 'Townies'.

## 2.2 Practical Appreciative

### 2.2.1 'Feeling at home' with brands

Turning to the second, **Practical Appreciative**, disposition, the lexicon of the young women in [19.WSW] is exemplary in its appreciation of Nike. **F2** says, 'it's good quality'; **L2**, 'it's affordable' and **S2** argues, 'it's very popular'. In [18.WSM] five men, all sixth formers from Walthamstow, (several are recent immigrants to Britain), Nike is praised again. For **A2** it is 'good quality', **M2** praises it because 'it looks nice' and 'the tracksuits are heavy' and because as **E2** says, 'it's never gonna go out of fashion cos it's just too big.' **J** from [19.WSW] sums up Nike's success in appealing to these teenagers, praising the brand for being a peoples' champion. Comparing it with Avirex, **J6** argues, it's accessible for those on limited budgets.

**J6 ... I think Nike has always stayed so popular so everyone can afford it most people can afford it (S Yeah) whereas like Avirex came into fashion you're spending like two hundred Pounds on a (L S Yeah) on a jacket that's like four sizes too big for you ha ha ha**

Later on **J28** argues wearing Nike makes her feel 'comfortable.' **T128** explains Nike makes her 'feel good ha ha'. **S** interjects, 'it makes you feel at home' and **S28** adds, 'Yeah it's like a uniform.' Elaborating on this feeling of 'at homeness', recent teenage migrants to Britain appreciate Nike because of their amplified need to fit into their new locales. In [18.WSM] **A3**, a recent migrant from North Africa argues, he appreciates Nike because, 'it's a world wide brand so everyone recognises it'.

This dimension of Nike clothing, it can be worn to help embody local cultural experience and competence, again and again, draws practical appreciation across the groups. In [19.WSW], five young women from Walthamstow, **F**, a recent Kurdish immigrant says, she appreciates brands because of what she perceives as their acceptability function, and for the social access wearing Nike potentially secures. Popular brands, she argues, help with the difficult process of mixing and blending in with peer groups in new countries and cultures.

**F** it's because because people usually wear these brands they like when they go to a different country they will always look for these brands (**J Mm**) and you know **not be lost sort** of buying something else

**J** Like internationally known

///

**S** Yeah because otherwise **you would feel like a misfit** (T1 Yeah) if you're like in another place and they're all wearing different clothes to you

For these discussants brands don't serve to fix, stigmatise and marginalise class 'others.' They help orientate you culturally. As F5 puts it, they stop you 'getting lost' if you are from another country because, as J5 says, they are 'internationally known'. Name brands according to these Non-White British women, help them blend in with the locals/ locality thus facilitating social acceptance. As F5, puts it 'when they go to a different country they will always look for these brands and *you know not be lost.*'

### 2.2.2 Feeling alone with brands

However, as with so much group discussion of the function of brands as local sub-cultural capital, the brands capacity to confer acceptable social status displays a contradictory double edged character. Just as brands may aid inclusion, in the fickle flux of symbolic exchange values, they can also act as barriers to those deemed 'outsiders'. In Leiss, Klein and Jhally's terms, brands can act as signs of exclusion, rather than badges of membership (1997). This is particularly so in the case of 'foreigners' who, for several members of group [20.WSM], have neither the economic or cultural capital to consume competently, as locals. In the following extract class and race condescension mix, echoing the meeting of discourse about class with gender and sexual identity.

**Z** Some people some people are foreign and it don't really bother them what they wear

**T** Yeah

**Z** Yeah they almost wear anything

**T** Do you do you think that that's true?

**J** Well I (Te I think) (Z Yeah they do a lot) I don't I don't necessarily think that that (Te Oh that's that's not that's) is true

**Te** I've noted some foreign people that wear some really suave clothes

**R** Yeah something like

**Te** Yeah I mean top designer labels but

**J** It depends on where you come from as well (Te Yeah yeah) as well

**Te** Yeah yeah it depends cos a a lot of people are raised to like know that (R Yeah) if this label just looks a bit funny you know that it's it's you're a I dunno it maybe part of

J It maybe cultural (Te Yeah really) yeah

R If when you come from India or something yeah you are used to wearing all these brands like high quality brands like high quality stuff like but if you come from somewhere which is just still a developing country like they'll just be glad to still have clothes on your back innit (Z Yeah) and they'll just pick up anything

Z That's that's what it all comes down to developed and developing countries for example if you come from a country like Bangladesh right and you don't have much money yeah then would you spend it

Te He he he he he

The trouble with some 'foreigners', in these discussants' estimation, is that they are so close to poverty they're unable to appreciate, what for these young men at least is, the sophisticated appeal of brands. 'Foreigners' run the risk of being looked down on and getting left out, just like 'trailer trash' and 'skanky birds.' Here, objectifying, fixing and social distancing discourses, return with vengeance, inflecting the overarching axis of class categorisation between 'rough and respectable',<sup>120</sup> with ethnic or race chauvinism.

Despite these contradictory takes on what brands can do for migrant populations, the hope of comfort and collectivity that popular branded goods appear to offer young people, clearly relates to one of the key qualities they are said to possess. Thus, practical appreciation of 'standard', or 'up to the standard' brands, is commonly voiced across the groups. In [18.WSM], five men all Sixth formers in Walthamstow, 'standard' brands again index class 'distinction' and respectability.

Te You can't afford everything but I try to at least keep (Z Keep up) up yeah it doesn't necessarily have to be the best thing (T Mm) as long as it's something like okay that it's **up to the standard**

Nike, for many teenagers, is the 'up to the standard brand', or 'brand canopy', which can act as a sign of respectability and normality. It forms part of a collectively shared and embodied social 'habitus' and a redoubt, however contradictory and temporary, in which to assuage anxiety. As several participants put it, Nike makes them 'feel at home' (18.S28) and protected from the risky negotiation of the assumptions and social labels which accompany consuming brands. R a young man from one of the Herts Sixth

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<sup>120</sup> However, it should be noted, Te disagrees with his fellows discussants and the criticism of Bengalis is made by a young man Z, who is of Pakistani origin, and R who is of Indian parentage. In addition it is worth noting that, bearing in mind their ethnicity; clearly the latter two discussants do seem to have been able to make something socially of their branded consumption.

Form's [3.HEM] explains, 'I think that by going with like an established you're sort of quite safe.....you can't sort of get bullied because everyone knows that you're sort of like mainstream.' The problem is, as (18.Y7) aptly comments, 'the good things are the bad things.' From feeling at home, to feeling a 'clone' or a 'lemming', the classifying power of the brand can rebound on those who chose it. Feeling 'at home' can turn into feeling 'controlled', and 'homely' inclusion in groups constantly vies with the threat of being alone and excluded by those who perceive Nike and other branded clothing, not as marks of cultural competence or signs of safety, but as marks of class inferiority, marginalisation and social stigma, cf 4(3.1 to 3.4).

### 2.3 Practical Critical

#### 'A pound a day just to wear trainers it's stupid'

Moving on, the third, **Practical Critical**, disposition appears in the context of talk about quality, fakes and pricing. Overt but limited criticisms of brands are voiced. Typically the cost of designer gear comes under fire. In group [7.BEM] such criticisms are forcefully aired.

I My friend after college once he buys so much designer things he bought Gucci trainers they cost him two hundred and seventy pounds for trainers you imagine how much he must be wearing everyday?

A They only last about six on the though after six months you need to get a new pair

I If you worked that out for every day if you divided two hundred and for six months by one hundred and eighty that's more than a pound (A day) a pound a day just to wear trainers it's stupid

Again in [16.WSM] A sets the other group members straight about their inflated price.

A Yeah it's like see these trainers here these are Reebok classics and I'm not being funny I went in to the shop and I was looking at the Nikes and I was looking at the Adidas and I thought to myself eighty or ninety hundred pounds and I don't even like Nike trainers anymore (H Mm) every time I buy Reebok now

H Yeah Reeboks are like fifty pounds

A I'm thinking of *all that money on those big Macs*

W Hah hah hah

The criticism, voiced by **A**, from [16.WSM], spills over into an **ironic critical discourse**, discharging the tension around **A**'s complaints about the cost of Nike and Adidas. This pattern is again in keeping with Billig's concept of 'ideological dilemmas.' The use of self deprecating humour consciously mimics the teenage fast food stereotype, indicating, **A** predicts, a response from other group members along the lines, *yeah it's too bad the price of Nike but don't get too upset about it*. Thus his criticism of Nike's exorbitant prices is deliberately discharged, and softened, by the joke about Big Macs with its implicit ironic point, *you'd only waste the money on burgers anyway*.

Paying a high price for branded goods, and your response to this, represents another ideological dilemma for teenagers. Just as high prices can produce angry and sharply critical discourse, paying high prices can also be a part of the enjoyment of consuming brands. **J** from [1.WW], one of four young women from Walthamstow, explains this paradox in the extract below.

**J** These are Airforces Nike Airforces and like erm

**T**  
you feel?

When you got them how did

**J** I feel good I feel good but that's how I am whenever trainers come out I always get them like it feels normal to me but then it feels good at the same time because like you spent £60 on a pair of trainers and you feel good and great and that's just how I am with my trainers

Here Featherstone's dialectic of 'controlled decontrol' takes on a class inflection as being 'free' to spend, some of the time, works with, and against, the more typical experience of the opposite state of affairs - not being free to spend, most of the time. Again, I think, this experience of pleasure is best understood in the broader context of the importance of the social status attached to branded goods, and the class distinction they are perceived to confer. **A11**, a young woman, and **S11**, a young man from one of the Essex college groups [6.HEMX], describe the regulatory effects of feeling looked at, and being judged for what you wear. **S** asserts the more he spends the better.

**S** No I'm not saying I don't care I said that before ... I like to go and spend I think probably for that reason to say to my mates yeah (**A** Yeah) **I've spent seventy Pounds on these Jeans**

Once again, though it's possible to identify a cluster of discourses which have a common theme in the criticisms aired about brands, a number of contradictory socially

formed perspectives clash as to how costliness is to be understood and judged. Criticism and appreciation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The very appeal of brands, for some, lies with their exorbitant price tags. Perhaps most significantly, this clash of discursive perspectives is evident not only between participants, but within the thinking of individual subjects. I will return to the question of contradiction later. More straightforwardly, the next group of young women express doubt about whether brands deliver quality.

**F** Sometimes some of the clothes aren't actually good quality they cost a lot (**J Yeah**) like there's a

**S** They are not always

**J** Like sometimes sometimes it's it's a nice but but it's not well put together

**TI** Yeah

**S** Yeah it's just got a little label

**F** And because of the label it costs so much

What's apparent here is the way the materiality of branded goods, their physical make-up and the quality of their construction, remain important factors in teenagers' experience of them. As we noted earlier, young people buy branded goods not brands. This again underscores how mistaken it is to view consumption on a purely symbolic level. It is this physically embodied dimension of consumer goods which, I've argued, has been frequently underplayed. These young people's experiences of branded consumption are best described as a series of emerging contradictory dispositions. Consuming brands is not just a matter of abstract 'discourse users' (Blackman: 2001: 8) decoding, and deploying, commodity signs. Recognising this social fact calls to mind Voloshinov not Baudrillard. The former argued, without ceasing to be an object or part of material reality, 'any consumer good can be made an ideological sign.' (Voloshinov 1986 [1929]: 10)

Finally, two more common and related themes, within this discursive field, are criticisms of the commercial role of the big brands for limiting the market share of smaller competitors and consumer choice. As **M9** in Group [18.WSM] puts it, 'it's bad for small businesses because you can't really... .. you can't break into the market or anything.' This domination of the market by big corporate brands provokes the following exchange in group [3. HM], six men from a Herts sixth form.

**R** You get a lot of choice but it's all constricted there's always gonna be constrict constrictions isn't there?

**O** Yeah

**N** They'll always be limits

**T** They'll always be?

**N** Limits

**T** That's an interesting idea constriction of choice what do other people think?

**Z** Yeah on the one hand I'd say like we're getting more sort of culturally diverse now though then I dunno cos especially with erm I don't know if this is going off the point and that with sort of erm globalisation and that it's just I think more culture's just dying away that and its just become more singular.

*Z's weighing up of the conflicting claims made about branded consumption in relation to globalisation, as leading to either 'diversity' or 'singularity', has wider ramifications. It illustrates once again the dilemmatic nature of thought and the limits to theories of ideology, which tend to overemphasise, in Althusserian terms, the interpellation of subjects in systematic or official ideologies. It also demonstrates the deficiencies of Foucauldian accounts which have overplayed the power of technologies of subjectification to subjectify, through the application of 'expert knowledges', as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3. Rather as Billig puts it,*

*it should not be assumed that the consistencies of theory are somehow imposed upon the schemata of everyday life, so that everyday life is a social representation of the consistent intellectual ideology, albeit in a baser, more conventional and essentially unthinking form. Instead it is necessary to consider the contradictory themes both between and within lived and intellectual ideology. (1989:32)*

## **2.4. Practical Creative**

### **2.4.1 Making it your own style?**

The fourth, **practical creative**, disposition is marked by a determination to practically think through and attempt to overcome the constraints of consuming brands. It refers to the myriad ways discussants' try to negotiate these difficulties by deploying de Certeau's 'tactics as an art of the weak' (1984: 36). Thus in embodied actions, as well as in thought, some young people strive to surmount the obstacles to self-expression which branding throws up. The range of 'tactics' adopted includes, shopping selectively and thriftily, in giant open air markets like the one held at North Weald airfield in Essex. **A9** from [6.HEMX] says, 'in the Summer you'll see me at North (S Ha Ha)

Weald spend a fiver and end up getting about hundred pounds worth of stuff ... .. I love it I love the fact that I get to spend like five pounds on a tee-shirt and my brother has stuff that's so expensive (J Yeah) just cos I don't care whether it's got a name.' Following a different creative tack, the young men in [3.HM] reveal they shop in charity shops.

N ... a lot more people shop in charity shops and that sort of thing now (yeah) It's sort of become cool to shop in a charity shop (yeah) I'd say so like I know a lot of people who shop in charity shops now to get cheap clothes and that I (O it's) suppose that's just (R yeah that's) just fashion though (R yeah it shows)

B Yeah some famous people say we shop in charity shops and then every one they follow what they do sort of thing

A That's because of the retro

N Yeah the vintage the vintage

T Because of the?

N Vintage, the fashion

A But er brands are taking advantage of that now as well

T Go on

A Cos erm Adidas have brought a lot of their old school range back

Despite A's comments about the incorporation of thrift style and retro lines into corporate fashion chains, these visits to charity shops still occasion a degree of creative sub-cultural 'bricolage' (Hebdige 1979:102-104). This involves the adaptation of existing brands, and branded clothes, as a creative response to living with the power of global brands. Customisation is taken up by some young people to create dress more attuned to their individual self expression. The young men in [5.HEM] discuss how H, makes his branded clothes more interesting. O33, sums up his classmate's efforts at customisation as, 'kind of making it [branded clothes] his own style'.

O Yeah cos you think H he wears well individual kind of brands

P Yeah

B But not really it's all like Levis and Diesel stuff it's just the way H he wears them and what he does to them

O And yeah that style

B So that's himself doing it really not the brands

**H**, as **B33** clarifies, 'is always just like cutting bits out of it or like just being different.' Though not widespread, modification and alteration is discussed. The practical creative disposition towards brands which asserts, you can change things to how you want them to be, is significant in group [19.WSW], five women sixth formers from Walthamstow. **J24** keenly explains how she uses her local cultural competence to make designer labels stretch by mixing brand names with non designer clothes.

**J24** ...for my birthday I will get at least five hundred pounds ... I went up the West End and saw all the things in the sale and it's like oh look (**S** yeah ha ha) ha ha ha even if it's a big number it would be like only twenty five pounds for this top and a skirt so I'll buy that three or four times matched with like non-designer jeans and the top that's designer and people will think yeah she (**S** Yeah) wears designer stuff quite a lot

It is important to note that, whilst her fellow discussants mostly agree with her optimism about the possibility of overcoming obstacles, this is not shared by all. **F23** cautions, 'if you're wearing the really high up brands then obviously you have got to have the money.' Discussion of the 'big box' retailer TK Maxx continues the creative approach to getting 'suited and booted.' **J** and **S** testify to the value of having a keen eye for flaws, in garments as a good chance to haggle. Despite shopping at TK Maxx reminding her of a 'jumble sale', **S** signals her pleasure at finding 'something nice', a Lacoste top. But it is **L** who leads the field creatively. She seeks out the seconds bin for any 'little stitching thing' which, she confidently asserts, will be 'easily fixable.'

**S27** It's like a jumble sale though

**F** They are good they have got all Levis

**J** I've been I've been with my dad when he was like looking for a shirt but

**S** You have to be determined in that shop

**J** Yeah definitely

**S** They got all the clothes and if you look hard enough you will find something that is so nice like they had logos like Lacoste there it's nice but you just have to look

**J** It's something like they've missed a stitch on the inside

**S** Yeah to like the buttons hanging off but you can just go home and sew it back on (**J** Yeah) it's them kind of things and it's very it's cheaper much cheaper

**J** Like there's ways around the actual (**S** Yeah ha ha) money money problems

**ALL** Ha ha ha

**TI** Why wear designers

**L** Most of the time you can just kind of even in the shops you know like when you got to a when you go to any shop and there's like a little stitching thing innit (**J** I know) you know that you know that it's easily fixable but you still go there you go on this little stitch yeah can you erm bring down the price

#### **2.4.2 Pecuniary indecency and clandestine bricolage**

However, going 'big box' and cheap, as a practical and creative response, does not come without its own contradictions. These are again shaped by the same disciplinary dimensions which emerged earlier: the social classificatory, discursive and scopic. Thus anxiety about social position or standing, as we will see, underpins concerns about being seen to buy cheap or on the market. This brief but poignant anecdote, describes the social hazards of being seen shopping in 'Pacific Clothing' and of buying special offers from their all too public window displays.

**L26** No trainers I couldn't buy from the market

**S** No no

**T** Why couldn't you buy trainers from the market?

**L** It's like everyone can see you trying them on in the market you don't know who they are

**R** Not even that cos they wouldn't do any designer ones you know

**L** Exactly

**J** Yeah that's how shallow it gets with me it's like I wouldn't buy them cos they don't do designer trainers on the market

**S** But some people are ashamed of like you know like Pacific Clothing and them ones

**J** Our family doesn't go there

**S** I've bought from there right but like if it's in the window yeah some people like it's so **bait** like (**J** Yeah ha ha) everyone's gonna know that I got it for five pounds

**J** It could be a really nice top in Risqué that I so badly want but I will not I refuse to buy it because it's in the window (**S** And everyone will know) I will probably go to Justin's or somewhere or even H & L if I can get exactly (**S** Ha ha) the same (**L** Ha ha) top but it is just in my mind (**S** **L** Yeah) no I will not buy it from there

What emerges here is a concern to be seen doing the right thing in the right place. L26 begins by telling the group she couldn't buy trainers from the market because she is constantly aware she may be in the judgemental eye of another. She gets support from S who interjects, 'No No' to the prospect of market shopping. In terms of modality, the repetition here emphasises S's uncompromising stance. J's hostility to the thought of shopping at 'Pacific Clothing' is similarly discursively underpinned by her emphatic statement, 'Our family doesn't go there'. Switching to 'our' in terms of mode of address further underlines her gravitas as the officious tone registers a formal declaration of intent never to cross that particular rubicon. These public statements of aversion to shopping on the market, or at 'Pacific Clothing', effect the same class based discursive social distancing as the proclamations of disgust made about 'Burberry' and 'Nickelson'. Here, J, S and the others, compete to make the strongest statement of repulsion at, and aversion to, such pecuniary indecency. But it is clear S, at least, has shopped at 'Pacific Clothing'. She faces a dilemma. How to explain this? Her partial solution is to modify her displacement, by declaring her aversion anew, as never buying anything *in the window*. That would really be so 'bait.'

Of particular interest here then, is how these young black women suffer from a similar anxiety about social status and class as that found in other groups of mainly white discussants. How they find creative ways around their lack of economic capital, is also significant because it emerges from, and is shaped by, this anxiety. Though some of them do use shops like 'Pacific', the trick is keeping this quiet. Consequently their creative thrift and bricolage, operates in clandestine mode. More than anything else, they aim to avoid the objectifying glance of the other, and the kind of classed classificatory gaze which might catch them out, and threaten to objectify, fix and socially distance them as 'poor', 'trailer trash' or, 'broken down people'. They balk at publicly going cheap by shopping in Walthamstow market, frequenting 'Pacific Clothing', or buying a 'really nice top from Risqué'. If it's in the window, and in the public eye or classifying gaze, buying and wearing such a top would, they imply, destroy their credibility and 'pecuniary decency'.

Whilst here we can see how their partial submission to neo-liberal marketing discourse - which implies social worth is analogous with material wealth - shapes their tactics of negotiation, their discourse also contains tensions. Thus, J's discourse contains 'seeds'

of self reflexive critique and counter positions. ‘Yeah’, she says, ‘that’s how shallow it gets with me.’ Her use of this trope of surface versus depth, echoes wider debates about the nature of the self, either as an ontologically deep inner character, soul or psyche, versus postmodern accounts which view self-identity as a temporary visage to be cast off when no longer socially useful. Such perspectives on identity, as I argued in **Chapters Two and Three**, circulate in popular understanding as part of what, Rose calls, the dissemination of ‘specialist knowledges’ and ‘techniques’ (1999), and they are central to the attempt to re-engineer the self under neo-liberalism. The extent to which concepts of the self, whether as ‘consuming’, ‘enterprising’ or ‘reflexive’ selves, or as self-monitoring agents as Giddens puts it (1991:38), permeates group discussion is examined further in **Chapter Six**.

## 2.5 Ironic Critical

### 2.5.1 ‘Embrace the cheapness ha ha ha!’

The penultimate, **ironic critical**, disposition towards brands emerges strongly in two groups. In [19.WSW] humour, especially shared collective laughter, plays a key part in discharging anxiety about consumption. In the first extract ‘non-uniform day’ one of the most common and contentious school experiences provokes humour. The seriousness of the occasion, with its powerful social injunction to ‘dress to impress’, is brought down to earth by **S’** recollections.

**J** But that’s why people dress up so much cos it’s your day to make a big impression

(**S** Yeah) the rest of your clothes could be (**S** Ha ha) old and tatty but if on the non-uniform day people see you in like the best this and the newest that then they will be like ‘oh yeah she’s got really good style’

**S** Yeah ha ha but then one day they might just catch you in the wrong thing ha ha (**ALL** Ha ha ha ha) **coming from Tescos with your mum**

Additionally, **J** ironically builds on her earlier assertion in more **practical critical** mode. Diadora now do ‘good quality ... the whole tracksuit costs sixteen pounds’. She applauds ‘the camp’ a ‘crew’ who hang out in her neighbourhood in Diadora, a conventionally ‘trashy’ or ‘skanky’ brand.

#### 19.WSW

**J18** ...there’s like a crew in my in my area called the camp and they their signature tracksuit is the actual Diadora tracksuit but no one will see it and think

like 'ugh like look at them cheap' (**S** Yeah) they'll just see it and think 'oh that's the camp tracksuit' (**S** Yeah) so sometimes people can embrace the cheapness ha ha ha and actually make that their image 'oh like I never wear designers I only wear this'

In [6.HEMX] **A** and **J**, two young women from one of the mixed gender groups, also exhibit the desire to not take choice of brands too seriously. They explain the pleasure to be had grabbing bargains at North Weald Market. Unlike the young women in the previous group, they don't appear crestfallen at the prospect of being caught - *in flagrante* - shopping in public.

**A** I love the fact that I get to spend like five pounds on a tee-shirt and my brother has stuff that's so expensive (**J** Yeah) just cos I don't care whether it's gotta a name of it

**J** And a lot of the stuff at North Weald are are like rip offs anyway but it's so good it's so cheap ha ha

In the next two extracts, **J** explains **A** was once a 'Grebe'. The joke is not vindictive it's shared and the declarative mode of address produces the ironic effect in **J**'s discourse. This use of irony suggests their playful attitude to adopting different sub-cultural styles, and to seeing the funny side of their choices. This group's sense of irony with respect to their consumption is further evidenced in the second extract. **S**, justifies his choice of music by ironically taking up the Essex boy stereotype to explain his 'suspect' musical selections.

[1]

**J** Yeah I wore like girls surfin gear and like Kickers and that

**A** She was a grebe he he

**T** What do you mean by a Grebe?

**A** Ha ha someone who wears baggy clothing ha ha and

**J** 'Oh my jeans are so baggy to wear'

**A** And scary spikey jewellery he he

**S** He he he

[2]

**J** Yeah but I like The Basement Jaxx as well

**A** I listen to RnB

**S** I can't even say cos I listen to everything cos when I'm at work

**J**

everything

No I do listen to pretty much

**S** Cos on my MP3 player in the car like all kind different kinds of music on it's got Meatloaf (**A** Ha Ha Ha) too I like a bit of Meatloaf

**A** S admit it

**S** Yesterday yesterday

**A** to Britney?

**S** What I was having was an Essex boy party for a couple of hours just the old classics Marvin Gaye (**J** Yeah that's alright) and everyone

### 2.5.2 Rhetorically distancing the excessive consumer

Switching focus back to group [19.WSW], the self deprecatory theme continues, albeit in a more confessional mode. This is mindful perhaps of the contradictory popular exhortations, organised around an axis of controlled and uncontrollable consumption, of positively framed injunctions to 'shop till you drop',<sup>121</sup> set against an equally pervasive pathological discourse of 'shopaholics', (*cf* Benson 2000). **TI24** initiates a series of revelations about her obsessive and fetishistic consumption. Whilst **S**, **J** and **L** appear to concur with **TI**, they also subtly establish discursive social distance from her confessions, reflecting a wider ambivalence surrounding 'admissions' of excessive consumption.

**TI 24** ... I'm obsessed with boots ha ha ha as you have noticed I get boots at least erm every other week and erm the weird thing is I only ever use them may be like up to five times then I forget about them and move onto the new pair ha ha

**T** That's a lot of boots

**S** That's what's different yeah I I don't people don't know some clothes that I've got that's why they think that I'm rich because I have like about ten pairs of trainers yeah more than that probably yeah but I don't wear them a lot cos they are like under my bed

**J** I have plenty of shoes but they are all different it's not like I could never have a pair of like not trying to dig at you but say you have a pair of black boots (**TI** Yeah) and you got out and see another pair of black boots that are similar but are just that bit better in your eye I I couldn't buy them because I would think (**S** Yeah) I've already got them

**F** Yeah

**L** That's what my sister does she'll buy like plain black boots that cost her about seventy pounds and it might just have a little squiggly line down the side or like

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<sup>121</sup> Thus Tesco's use of the phrase, to promote its internet shopping service, for example.

a slip or like a zip going across and it's exactly the same and she'll buy it and it's like what's the point?

J Yeah ha ha my sister's like that my sister is literally the black Imelda Marcos (All Ha he ha) but my our room is completely covered in shoe boxes and she has got like little Polaroid pictures of each pair of shoes on the boxes (S Oh my God) so she doesn't have to open them to find out what they are

J's qualifying phrase, 'not trying to dig at you', is a classic example of implicit discourse overwhelming explicit. It can't be anything but a 'dig', given that J sets about illustrating how her consumption is so much more rational and controlled. The use of 'but' coupled with J's declaration she has lots of shoes, 'but they are all different', 'I couldn't buy' anything 'similar', establishes critical social distance from TI. TI, it seems, has breached the boundaries of decent taste, with all its attendant and socially potent class ramifications. L subtly distances herself too, by explaining what her sister does. J discharges her implicit criticism of TI with humour. J calls her sister 'the black Imelda Marcos' and reveals the secrets of her obsessive filing system. Clearly, in each instance, TI's relations with J, L and S, are marked by tensions between the implicit and explicit aspects of their discourse. Ostensible support for TI also carries a tacit critique. This discursive work around TI, once again, performs the kind of social distancing Skeggs (2004) and Probyn (2000) describe.

Billig recommends, we analyse 'the implicit and explicit aspects of ideological dilemmas' (1988:21). This approach reveals the working through of 'formal ideological theories into the lived ideology of ordinary life' (ibid.: 26), and the operationalisation of concepts of self control/restraint, which frame L and S's censure of TI. 'Controlled decontrol' may be pleasurable for some, as Featherstone (op. cit.) argues, but it is a class based practice. Thus, being judged as excessive in your consumption for young working class women, such as TI, provokes subtle but telling notes of disapproval and social distancing. Young women face many difficulties negotiating the contradictory subject positions suggested by commercial, governmental and popular discourses of consumerism. As the introduction emphasised, a range of class and gender stereotypes, or semiotic condensations, await attachment to those women who are judged to own too little, or as here, too much.

## 2.6 Radical Critical

### 2.6.1 Between the explicit and implicit - 'money grabbing wankers?'

Finally, with regard to the **radical critical** disposition, the importance of attending to the 'contrary, or dilemmatic aspects of social beliefs', is again underlined. In group [16.WSM], four young men, all sixth formers from Walthamstow, discuss which brands they like and dislike.

**D16** Couple of years a go erm Robbie Fowler done that (**W Dockers**) thing yeah Liverpool dockers yeah and he got in a lot of trouble for it and I think that is just pathetic and I don't know why a multi-billion pound company needs to sue a footballer (**W Mm** for a statement) yeah for a statement about something that is (**W Worth saying**) yeah actually worthwhile making a statement about and that

**T** So ever since they did that you haven't forgotten it?

**D** It's not just about that it's about the fact that if anyone brought out anything with CK in the middle of Calvin Klein would sue em because they are greedy money grabbing wankers... sorry

**T** Greedy money grabbing wankers?

**D** I didn't say that I said

**ALL** Ha ha ha ha

**A** Those were your exact words

**D** Bankers yeah  
didn't I said bankers didn't I

**W** Ha ha ha yeah

There are a number of things worth critically examining here. Firstly, Fowler's slogan '*500 Liverpool DoCKers illegally sacked*' appeared eight years ago<sup>122</sup>, half a lifetime for **D**. Klein's argument about 'loglo' the use of he brand's 'logo', its signficatory power, against itself to undermine 'preferred readings' seems vindicated. Secondly, the way **D** frames his arguments is significant. For **D**, this is more about the broader issue of freedom of expression than a narrower concern for these strikers. In terms of modality, **D** argues straightforwardly, CK are 'just pathetic'. But he chooses to qualify the terms of his support for Fowler's actions. In other words, **D**'s response is as much an ethical gesture of support for Fowler's right to free speech, as a condemnation of

<sup>122</sup> Fowler wore this, during a European Cup match for Arsenal in the 1997-1998 soccer season. He was fined by UEFA, CK, didn't pursue their threat of legal action.

corporate greed or upfront solidarity with the Liverpool dockers. 'It's *not just about that* it's about the fact that *if anyone* with CK in the middle of... Calvin Klein would sue em because they are greedy money grabbing wankers... sorry.' **D** comes to his radicalism, in a manner 'specific to the properties of his everyday life' (Billig 1988:34). In particular, it's CK's repressive response to Fowler's attempt to make a 'worthwhile statement' which elicits **W**'s and **D**'s sympathy.

Thirdly, **D**'s discourse says much about how his consciousness works socially, dialogically and rhetorically. He is not as Billig puts it, 'blindly following the dictates of ideological schemata.' (1988:27). The development of **D**'s forceful criticism of CK, doesn't mean his thought is without contradictions, and it is these which index his ideological outlook is 'lived', as Thompson (1984) argues, *cf* 3(3.7). To say ideology 'is lived' here means recognising **D** takes the side of a multi-billion pound footballer against a 'multi-billion pound company'. It means understanding **D**'s thinking combines humour, irony, practical rationality and a radical sense of social justice. This discursive mix is crystallised in his description of CK as 'money grabbing wankers'. By substituting this phrase with rhyming slang for wanker i.e. 'merchant banker', **D** simultaneously offers and withdraws any apology<sup>123</sup>. This alternative idiomatic figure of speech, merchant 'banker' merely duplicates the original offending phrase. Overall this example of the development of a radical disposition towards corporate brands, such as CK, again shows the complexity and contrary nature of ideological discourse in, what Moscovici calls, 'the thinking society' (1984).

## 2.6.2 Exploitation, ideology and cynical modes of knowledge

In the same group [16.WSM], **W5** raises 'the exploitation of children in Indonesia'. A range of contradictory perspectives emerge on this issue. Permeating these is an 'ideological imagination' (Billig 1998:145) marked, in part, by a specific form of 'cynicism'. Žižek argues, ideology is less about what people don't know than *what they do* (1989: 30-33). Rather than formulating ideology as naivety, as Marx does in *Capital*, 'they do not know it but they are doing it' (ibid.: 28), Žižek formulates ideology as a 'cynical mode of knowledge'. In this mode people know more than they are credited for but choose to ignore this knowledge, carrying on their lives *as if* they

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<sup>123</sup> The explicit discourse of his contrition is undermined by the implicit discourse which strikes out the apology.

were naïve. Thus he argues, ‘they know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know’ (ibid.: 32).

**W5** points out, ‘I don’t I don’t think about it when I buy their clothes.’ **H5** concurs, ‘No No’. **D5** elaborates, ‘if you didn’t exploit them they wouldn’t get that 10p anyway’. Using an engaged rationale of economic expediency **W**, **H** and **D** buy Nike, despite their knowledge of corporate labour abuses, arguing Indonesian children should be grateful for the chance to work. **D** in particular argues, without it ‘they would just die’. This practical rationale continues when the issue of fair trade comes up.

**A6** At the end of the day the way I see it yeah

**W**

They want jobs

**H**

You get me they’re

working so at the end of the day I’d rather receive 10p than just be jobless that’s what I’m saying so in a way it’s bad but at the same time it’s kind of good still

**D** Come on think about it yeah I don’t care what anyone says you see they say Nike and Adidas and Nike are bad yeah it doesn’t matter man if you went and bought a pair of Arrows like Walthamstow market like they are still made in the same place they are still made by the same people (**H** Mm) so it doesn’t matter what you buy unless you’re like gonna walk around in some horsehair tee-shirt (**A** Ha ha) like and monk trousers (**H** Ha ha) and (**A** Mm ‘Fair trade’ he he) you know what I mean yeah you’re not gonna get fair trade clothes

**T** What do you think about this fair trade idea?

**W** It’s good in principle but you know when the big companies are involved it’s hard to shut them down cos they got so much money and power

**H** Mm yeah

**W** And you can’t deal with that and that’s how they’ve operated since they’ve started (**A** Yeah) so they don’t see it any other way and

**A**

**At the end of the day** at the end of the day yeah the world runs is run like on unfair trade innit **but**

The dilemmatic quality of this discourse is evident once again. Focusing on **D**’s input, Billig’s observations that, ‘ideological inheritance is not a simple one’, and that ‘intellectual ideology does not donate a series of solved problems’ but rather ‘provides conflicting themes of theoretical dilemmas to common sense’ (1988:40), are exemplified by the dialectical shifts in **D**’s speech. There are five major thematic segments in **D**’s discourse, related in a dialectical pattern of thesis versus antithesis, making up a grand total of ten contrary fragments. These are mostly open questions and

equivocal, not closed, statements. For example, 1. i) Come on think about it yeah <> ii) I don't care what anyone says 2. iii) you see they say Nike and Adidas and Nike are bad yeah.<sup>124</sup> Thus D simultaneously talks to himself as well to the group, setting up, making and responding to partial declarations, which move to closure with the **practical critical** synthesis that there's no alternative but to consume the big brands. However, his final '*but*' implicitly recognises the validity of more radical criticisms. It keeps alive the desirability of having alternative options, by signalling that his discourse remains dialogical and open.

In the rest of the exchange these **practical critical** common sense themes and arguments are continually drawn on as discursive repertoires. They are used to attempt to reign in the development of more **radical** arguments, emerging from contrary discursive 'seeds' (Billig 1988:17). The dilemma felt by group members as to the role of big companies is summed up by H, 'in a way *it's bad* but at the same time *it's kind of good*'. Their sheer size 'money and power' make them appear untouchable. Such a judgement is commonly made across the groups. It offers a powerful justification both for the status quo of contemporary consumerism, and for developing the level of detachment and cynical mode of knowledge which A,D,H and W demonstrate when buying brands, such as Nike. But, why do these young men invest in elements of pragmatic discourse which stymie the contrary seeds of radical criticism? Here again Billig's concept of 'double declaiming' proves useful.

According to Billig, 'double declaiming' refers to 'a particular kind of complexity' or 'doubleness' in speakers' utterances so that, 'claims about others' are also 'claims about themselves' (1998: 87). When W tells the group, 'they want jobs' he is also implying he and his friends want jobs too. Thus they, implicitly, accept in their own lives, the widely circulated ideological logic of the 'jobs at any price' argument. Occasionally, this argument is made explicit. H declares, '*I'd rather receive 10p than*

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<sup>124</sup> These are in detail 1 i) Come on think about it yeah <> ii) I don't care what anyone says  
 2 iii) you see they say Nike and Adidas and Nike are bad yeah <> iv) it doesn't matter man  
 if you went and bought a pair of Arrows like Walthamstow market  
 3 v) like they are still made in the same place they are still made by the same people (H Mm) <> vi) so it doesn't matter what you buy  
 4 vii) unless you're like gonna walk around in some horsehair tee-shirt (A Ha ha) like and monk trousers <> viii) (H Ha ha) and (A Mm 'Fair trade' he he)  
 5 iv) you know what I mean yeah you're not gonna get fair trade clothes <> iiv) *but*

*just be jobless.* When W tells the group, 'they don't see it any other way' he too is 'double declaiming' - he doesn't see 'it' any other way either. Yet, as we have seen, what marks out this group's discussion is the tension running through it between the resigned pragmatism of A's, 'at the end of the day', practical discourse and the critical knowledge which informs the contradictory open quality of his utterances, the world's 'run on unfair trade innit *but*'. Overall then, returning to Žižek's argument, it is not that these men do not know about the exploitation behind brands, but that in practical everyday terms they see no choice but to behave cynically as if they knew nothing. Such a pattern of knowing, but deliberately forgetting, brings a new level of complexity to Thompson's concept of ideology 'as lived' (1984). It also recalls Gramsci's argument that common sense is characterised by contradictory consciousness (1971). We will return to questions of ideology in the conclusion.

### 2.6.3 Sweat shops, powdered milk and Timberlands

In group [18.WSM] similar criticisms of branded goods, and the corporations behind them arise. However, amongst this group of young men from Walthamstow, concern about the exploitative aspects of consumption develops into a focus on the flooding of developing countries with flows of cheap, harmful synthetic food products, by global multinationals.

M ...they you know they do erm they get people from third world countries to do like you know the

E Like sweatshops

T What do you think about this?

Y That's really taking

E Depriving people

A Sometimes they take advantage

T Who are they?

A I'm not sure but I heard that Nestle in Africa they give powdered milk for free to women and then when there is no more milk in their breast they are forced to buy their milk from Nestle to feed (E They are exploited over there and that's it) their children

As in the earlier example, condemnation of sweatshops develops collectively. This bears witness to the fact that these discursive positions constitute elements of a shared, albeit contradictory, consciousness (Gibbs 2003). Once again, a dialogical pattern of tentative initial declarations, followed by affirmation and filling in with supportive

detail, emerges. By the time of A's last comment above, the group has moved from a series of cautious general assertions to the concrete example given by A, Nestlé's dumping of powdered milk.<sup>125</sup>

As I have suggested throughout this account of the emergence of the six dispositions, and the discourse which partly constitutes them, these dispositions are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they emerge in a constant dialectic between sometimes complementary but also contradictory discursive themes, with clashes within, and between, the thinking expressed by individual's and groups. Hence not all criticism of big brands focuses on contemporary labour and human rights abuses. J33, in group [19.WSW], attacks Timberland from a historical perspective. 'Timb's' as she calls them, one of America's most successful designer boots, stand condemned for the manufacturer's alleged connections with the slave trade.

**J35** ... Timberland tree is what they used to hang black slaves on (S Yeah) and (S Yeah) then the fact that I find it quite funny it doesn't affect us now but because obviously it's completely new management and new people and new directions (S L Yeah yeah) in the company but it's the fact that like you'll see a load of blacks like wearing like Timberland yeah yeah I've got the newest Timbs I've got the newest Timb's nuh nuh well okay yeah you hang yourself on that tree over there (S He he ha ha yeah it is like that though)

#### 2.6.4 A World Without Brands?

To conclude, I want to consider how these dilemmas, as to the social injustices and abuses involved in making branded goods weighed against the pleasures and convenience they offer, can move towards at least partial resolution. Such a movement occurs when debate focuses on the question, do you think the world would be a better place without brands?

[16.WSM]

**H** Not really cos like it they still create jobs but it's just like the amount of money that's involved should be increased cos like (D They should get more pay) Mm that's what I'm saying cos they have responsibilities like us that's what I'm saying

**A** The world wouldn't work without brands

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<sup>125</sup> This is amplified by my two intervening questions which ask for clarification of who 'they' are. Despite these, the pattern remains one of the collective emergence of tacit shared knowledge. Indeed my question 'what do you think about sweat shops?' serves to index this point. It's only ever obliquely answered, as E, Y and A, attempt to elaborate on their own thoughts rather than answer my question directly. Thus E's 'sweatshops' are places where 'taking', 'depriving' and 'taking advantage' all take place.

T The world wouldn't work without brands why do you say that?

A Cos this like this phone here is a Nokia phone yeah and like that phone there is an (W LG) LG yeah it's like two different companies produce these things (W Mm) and that's two different brands (W Yeah) **that would be like Communism** kind of thing where (W Everyone's the same) is the same (W Mm) and everyone has got to wear one like (W Mm mm) like it has to you have to have a choice you have to have individuality like (W Individuality) yeah

D33 I think if there was no such thing as brands I think people would just choose different ways to define themselves

What is striking about this exchange is that an ideological dichotomy surfaces which underpins much of the groups' discussions - the clash between capitalism and communism. In more detail, A's modality as to the need for brands, is worth noting compared to W and D, because A is so sure, 'the world wouldn't work without brands.' However, H's contrary response to A, 'not really', suggests significant qualification in his thinking. Furthermore, D is not at all sure that the world would be a worse place without brands. He envisages the radical prospect of difference occurring outside of the nuances of branded consumption, 'people would just choose different ways to define themselves'.

It is A's invocation of the spectre of Communism which leads W to conclude no brands, no difference, no individuality - 'everyone's the same'. But A's arguments are not so readily accepted by H who reverts back to **practical criticism**, arguing workers in developing countries should be paid living wages because, 'they have responsibilities like us.' A familiar pattern develops with several strands of argument being deployed discursively in a manner evocative of Billig's kaleidoscope of opinions (op. cit.). 'Interdiscursivity', Fairclough points out (1992), refers to patterns of meaning which occur across speakers and groups. In terms of the critiques which emerge here, and in other groups, those which range from the 'submissive' to the 'practical critical' are hegemonic. However in keeping with that concept, ideas about brands constitute an open, contested and contradictory terrain, a topography marked by the dilemmas of consumption, a duality of consciousness and doubleness in thought.

In [18.WSM] a discursive kaleidoscope is again on display. The same concern about the role of branding in expressing and repressing difference is discussed. However, M's contribution with its vision of a world in which colour, one of the most powerfully

entrenched cultural signifiers of gender, would be subverted, opens up a horizon of possibilities and a much more radical perspective beyond the **practical critical**.

[18.WSM]

**M** If there was no brands you'd you'd see people with lime green tops and pink trousers and **pink wouldn't be a girl's colour**

M's comment, 'pink wouldn't be a girl's colour', is striking, because its multicoloured vision of the world is a brave statement, given the persistence of 'traditional' regulatory norms about gender, and sexual identity, amongst these young men. It also vividly points to the limitations and 'constrictions' felt, and expressed, by many of the respondents, and to the paucity of choice they experience when consuming brands.

The final extract from a group of four young men, all sixth formers in Walthamstow, combines elements of **practical critical** recognition of the world they live in, including explicit comment on capitalism, with acceptance of the difficulties of challenging corporate brand power. In contrast to the previous group, a more consensual collective dialogue emerges. This articulates a **radical critical** disposition towards capitalism and a willingness to think the unthinkable, by tearing down corporate power.

[20.WSM:25/26]

**R** It's a Capitalist world

**Te** Already

**T** Capitalist world

**Te** Yeah and the amount of (Z Money) now you know Nike makes cos it endorses different like sponsors different aspects of the world (R Yeah Z Yeah it's all about the money) like like you have like Nike competitions where people actually make money (Z Make Money) playing basketball and football and whatever

**J** And you just can't you just can't get rid of them

**Te** Yeah it's too big an industry to be closed down

**J** It's linked it's linked the domino effect

**Te** Yeah

**J** If one thing goes then you know everything goes yeah

**T** Would you like to see it happen?

**R** Yeah

**Te** Yeah

**R**  
Personally  
**T**  
Personally

(Te Yup) anybody disagree? What would be the main reason why you want it to happen?

**Z** Because it will save me money

**R** Yeah and it would be like taking control because

**T** It would be saving you money (Te Yeah saving money) how would it be taking control then?

**J** At the moment like erm I reckon clothes should be more about design how it looks like not what what brand names (R Yeah) what labels on the clothes so in that way it's taking control out of not not people sometimes they don't look for the design anymore

**R** We could do without the brand no more signs

**Te** Give people back more control

**R** Yeah (J Yeah Z Yeah) and try and express themselves

Even here, when the legitimacy of capitalism is questioned, the radical challenge is framed by everyday lived and embodied experiences. **J** wants to see the back of brands because it will mean focusing on design not labels. **Z** sees getting rid of brands as saving money. **R** raises 'taking control' but he doesn't elaborate, preferring instead to concur with **J**'s arguments about design. **R**'s closing comments to the group, 'we could do without brands no more signs' and the responses they elicit, people should 'take back more control' and 'express themselves', index an emergent **radical critical** disposition, however disparate, which isn't going to be easily 'cool hunted', 'hot wired' or 'looped' by the corporate marketers.

### **3. Conclusion**

#### **3.1 Contradictory thinking and the six dispositions**

To conclude, I want to recall the arguments made by theorists who stress the power of brands. Lury (2004:8-9) argues, brands are 'new media objects' and 'performative' entities with 'open meanings', whose asymmetrical operation, in terms of power relations between producers and consumers, is achieved via an ever tighter marketing 'loop'. She argues, this allows the 'incorporation of information about the everyday activities of subjects', so that consumers become 'entangled' in the qualitative values of

the brand (ibid.). Goldman and Papson put things more strongly when they argue, Nike, as a 'commodity sign', can signify everything from individual transcendence to race empowerment (1999: 24-25). Finally, Klein (2000:148-149) argues, the power of the 'cool hunters' means anything of qualitative cultural value can be brought under the 'brand canopy' and commercially 'colonised'. Set against these positions, my research shows, despite the validity of this analysis, it doesn't tell the whole story. Processes of incorporation do have their limits. We have seen how CK was dismissed by D for attempting to silence Robbie Fowler and how Timberland was linked to slavery. In one final example, A11 in group 16. WSM, links Hugo Boss to Nazism, 'they made the uniforms for the Nazis didn't they?'<sup>126</sup>

The ability of the brand to cannibalise and assimilate anything sucked in to its hub, brought under its 'canopy' or into its network of meanings, is not infinite. Despite the power of peer to peer marketing<sup>127</sup> and other forms of 'cool hunting' actual peer to peer discourse, as indexed in the focus groups, contains a significant measure of 'peer to peer resistance.' These results have evidenced a **submissive** subjectified orientation towards brands in which feelings of giving in to the pressure to buy, and identify with, brands can predominate. We have also seen **appreciation** of what branded clothes can do for their wearers, in terms of the positive feelings of belonging imbued. And we have noted how these dispositions are marked by contrary thoughts, feelings and experiences. These can lead to a more **critical** disposition, which can take a highly embodied form in **creative** customisation. Additionally, we have seen humour and **irony** constitute another embodied disposition towards branding, and how it can discharge some of the social anxieties choice of brands provoke. Finally, we have surveyed an emergent **radical critical** disposition which aims to challenge the power of corporate brands. In the light of this pattern of dispositions, with its complex and contradictory discursive elements,<sup>128</sup> together with their attendant embodied experiences, feelings and actions, the dichotomy of 'active' versus 'passive' consumers leaves much to be desired.

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<sup>126</sup> It's unlikely that such overtly racist and Nazi connotations will become part of a contemporary main stream brand canopy.

<sup>127</sup> For a thorough overview of 'peer to peer' marketing techniques see Quart, A. (op. cit.)

<sup>128</sup> The kaleidoscope of opinions Billig writes of. (1988)

What emerges in **Chapter Five**, is a composite picture of interrelated, porous and often contradictory dispositions. They arise dialogically and dialectically from the opinions held about brands and branded goods in the context of, and in contest with, wider ideological discourses in public circulation. These include ideas about 'taste', excessive consumption and loss of control. Such ideas index anxiety about class as it is regulated through the 'rough respectable' axis of pecuniary decency, using scopical and discursive regimes of social distancing, fixing and stereotyping. These broader ideological practices and the dilemmas thrown up by youngsters' embodied experience of brands as multidimensional objects, shapes dispositions towards brands and branded consumption. With regard to individual subjects, the specific conjunctures and constellations of discourse which form a part of the make up of their subjective dispositions vary, but they are clearly linked to their embodied social location in class as well as gender and race terms. I will return to this in the conclusion. Billig argues that 'common sense' is very much a 'kaleidoscope' in which 'a limited number of elements are continually twisted into an infinite number of new configurations' (Billig 1992). However, this doesn't mean common sense, as we have seen above, cannot 'consolidate into patterns' (ibid.: xvi) and thus the emergence of the six dispositions underlines this.

What we have here is not just another case of Blair's children,<sup>129</sup> as the narcissistic materialist consumers we so often see represented in class and gender stereotypes of 'Essex boys and girls', and in media caricatures such as 'Chav' teen nightmare Vicky Pollard<sup>130</sup>. Rather we have a generation of teenagers, as sampled in this study, who are attempting to negotiate the problematic psycho-social terrain of an ever deepening commodity culture.<sup>131</sup> This is subjectively manifest in the dilemma between a 'personalised' and 'commodified experience of the self.' Crystallised and personified in the series of potentially damaging reified social types and stereotypes, detailed above, young people negotiate the gap between such reductive semiotic condensations, and

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<sup>129</sup> I use the term to draw an analogy with the older more familiar, 'Thatcher's children or kids' which emerged in popular discourse at the end of her second term of government, since we are now well into New Labour's third term.

<sup>130</sup> 'Chav' teen Vicky Pollard is one of the most popular stock characters in BBC Three's award winning series 'Little Britain'.

<sup>131</sup> Jameson F, (1984) *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* NLR 146. Jameson is the clearest on how as he puts it 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production more generally.' p56

their embodied sense of self experience, identity and location in the social order. Negotiating these difficult ideological dilemmas involving consumption, self-identity, status and social worth comes with the risk of psycho-social damage. This is inflicted by the symbolic violence of 'taste' which remains a central mechanism for maintaining class boundaries and relations of domination. Within the ever expanding range of contemporary consumption practices and regimes, their own interpretations of unofficial and official discourses/ ideologies vie for hegemony in shaping their sense of self, other and group identity. Thus, it is in the context of this struggle to strive to be more than either a 'demographic for Nike or thought of as a hooligan' (Quart 2003:288),<sup>132</sup> that Billig's rhetorical approach to consciousness as the 'debating chamber of the single mind' (1989:18), proves its value. However, as **Chapter Six** shows, we also need to address the specifically embodied dimensions, and emotional economy, of consuming brands.

### **3.2 Agency, structuration and subjectification**

The possibilities for agency through consumption can only be properly assessed if critical analysis keeps in its frame of reference the embodied disciplinary dynamics of consumption, outlined above, as well as the struggle to negotiate and creatively surmount these. Returning once more to Giddens' overarching dilemma, these results vividly ground this in the struggles taking place within and between young people, subjectively and socially. Whilst neo-liberal discourses and practices aim to reduce the self to a set of consumer choices, competences and experiences, such attempts at subjectification do not go uncontested. Counter arguments, criticisms and practices are being voiced, creatively performed and enacted. As **R** from [18.WSM] argued, 'we could do without the brands no more signs.'

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<sup>132</sup> Quart, A.(2003:288)

## **Chapter Six**

### **Brands and identity: emotions and versions of the self**

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 'Versions' and 'visions' of the self and emotions

I want to move things on by addressing two key questions which arise from the results so far. The first is, what kinds of emotions are involved in the practices of, and dispositions towards, consuming brands outlined above? Secondly, what kind of 'versions' (Despret 2004: 29-30) of the self are referred to, and taken up, by these young people, as they negotiate the dilemmas and contradictions of identity, in relation to consumption? Despret's work on the ethnopsychology of the emotions is important to this chapter because she stresses the emotions - which play such a key role in our sense of self - are not natural and universal. Rather, they emerge from historically specific cultural contexts so that, 'practices produce the notions of our traditions' (ibid.:16). Despret, explains, how seemingly universal emotions, such as 'fear', are unknown in other cultures. The work of ethnopsychologists has underlined this, she argues, since there are a range of emotions from other cultures which are, 'accessible to us only with difficulty and, we cannot fully understand them without re-creating the world that gave rise and meaning to them.' As some parents will know, she points out, unless emotions are taught they just don't emerge, 'as is the case with fear' (ibid.:1-2).

What is perhaps most interesting about Despret's work is the distinction, she draws, between 'versions' and 'visions' of emotions. 'Versions,' she argues, indicate the emotional terrain we practically create for our selves socially, and historically, through concepts which act as both 'carriers and products' of our understanding. Thus, the historical development of the romantic novel, in relation to 'love', acts as both a 'vehicle' and 'product' of our emotional makeup, both enabling us 'to fall in love' and being itself enabled, over 'a long history', by something we have come to name, and know, as love (ibid.: 19-20). For Despret, 'versions' indicates the recognition that these 'vehicles' or 'carriers' are but one set of possibilities for organising and categorising the raw material of feelings, what she calls 'the passions' (ibid.). The other term in her couplet, 'visions', indicates the kind of version of emotions which is 'imposed' through institutional, material and discursive practices. Because 'visions' serve to occlude, and thus exclude, other possibilities, i.e. other ways of thinking about, categorising and responding to our feelings, and our sense of self, I would add, they are the stuff of power and ideology or doxa.

I want to explore the relevance of this distinction, between ‘versions’ and ‘visions’ of the emotions and the self, in relation to the emotional economy which surrounds consumption and, in particular, consuming brands. To do this, I will begin by outlining the emotions which append to consumption as its ‘psychic economy’ (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2004:163). In particular this includes the spectrum of anxieties and fears of worthlessness and stigmatisation, which choosing, both crystallises and responds to, given the operation of taste, as symbolic class domination, explored extensively above. I will then turn to examine how its ‘other’, namely feelings of worth or ‘self-esteem’, emerges alongside fear. Finally, I will turn to dilemmas about the nature of the self, and the conflicting ‘versions’ and ‘visions’ of selfhood and identity, which emerge in some of the group discussions.

## **1.2 Dilemmas of the self and self invention**

At the micro level of the social canvas, on which this research is focused, group discussions and debates are often animated, albeit implicitly, by the practical everyday experience of tensions between conflicting versions or concepts of the self.<sup>133</sup> There is also a further tension between these ideological vehicles, and discourses, and the lived social experience of consumption. As Gramsci, arguing against intellectual elitism, once put it, ‘all men are philosophers’ (1971:323). **Chapters Four and Five** have already demonstrated how the lay person’s unofficial, or as Gramsci called it, ‘spontaneous philosophy’ (ibid.), could emerge from their interpretation of linguistic and theoretical resources shared, in part, with official philosophers, as well as from their engagement with unofficial ideological discourses. A key question which arises, in this chapter, is what kind of interface exists between expert knowledge and common sense, between the specialised discourses of science, psychology and sociology, and everyday discourse about the self and identity?

In the previous chapter we saw discussion of the self framed by metaphors of surface and depth. For one young woman, her sense of self operated through this ontological framing and she frequently used the term ‘shallow’. Thus she anxiously and self critically regarded herself as being too ‘shallow’, superficial or light weight, echoing a very widespread way of talking about, and indeed, denigrating the self. She could, of

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<sup>133</sup> Such conflicting positions on the self were critically reviewed in the literature covered by **Chapters One, Two and Three**

course, only think about herself in this way, because she was aware of another counter position on the self as ontologically heavy or deep, and therefore as conventionally more authentic and valuable. Clearly, she was thinking through and negotiating her sense of self, by implicitly drawing on wider paradigms and debates, modern versus postmodern, and essentialist versus constructionist views of the self etc.

The contradictions between such conflicting ‘visions’ of the self are of particular interest because, as I suggested from the outset, the imperative under neo-liberalism is to continually choose, to be mobile and to be the kind of reflexively transformative agent Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and others enthusiastically describe. Such a self is one whom they infer travels light, unencumbered – paradoxically - by the kind of depth and weight the young woman above castigated herself for supposedly lacking. She, or he, they argue, must reinvent and remake themselves to keep pace with the break up of old social bonds, relationships and traditional forms of association and sociality, referred to in **Chapter Two**. The prize on offer, they suggest, to those who seize their chance, is ‘self mastery’ or, as Beck puts it, the opportunity for the first time to write your own ‘individualised’ biography and to, ‘experience personal destiny’ (1992: 94). But, as I stressed above, the notion of such a fluid mobile agent or reflexive transformative self has been rightly criticised for being a particularly classed one, as Skeggs (2004) pointed out. ‘The ridiculous simplicity of a discourse which suggests we should all simply remake ourselves in the new democracy’ (Walkerdine et al *ibid.*: 149), is also challenged by the difficult dynamics of transformation and mobility for working class people, due to their lack of social, cultural and economic capital or resources.

On a subjective level, the abstract picture of the reflexive, ‘entrepreneurial’ (Rose 1999) and so bourgeois choosing self, is further complicated by the ‘great emotional costs’ the experience of choice, transformation and ‘mobility’ incurs. Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001:158-163) have harrowingly and incisively surveyed this ‘emotional landscape’ of fear and its ‘massive psychic defences’ (*ibid.*: 145), amongst working class girls, in particular. In order to make the educational grade, and to successfully embark on the trajectory of transformation to being a bourgeois subject, they must ‘dis-identify’ with, and suffer the separation and loss of, their class location, family and social identity.

As these authors also argue, such class inflected emotional anxiety and stress is not just a phenomena of working class life. It also exacts a 'price', in terms of psychic damage, from middle class girls (ibid.: 145). For these young women, their psychic stress centres on the fear of losing their class position and status, if they are perceived as failing educationally. 'Failure' here, it should be noted, means doing anything less than exceptionally well, as a matter of routine. Thus, the experience of class casts a terrible emotional shadow on their lives too. The 'positive gloss' on self invention, as Walkerdine et al (ibid.: 3) put it, is thrown into further doubt by the necessity for some people to be fixed, so that others can move, which Skeggs (2004) again highlights. The subjective realities of this discursive objectifying, fixing and social distancing, together with all the psycho-social vicissitudes examined above, has also been taken up by Massey (1994) and Morley (2000), cf 4(3.6), and Morley and Robbins (1996). Together, these criticisms mean self-invention, identity transformation, lightness, mobility and fluidity stand awkwardly, when set against the premium placed on authenticity, and the necessity of having a bounded self to actualise in the first place. I will discuss this contradiction further in the conclusion.

The difficulties and dilemmas around identity, the young people in this research refer to, are placed in a useful, and cogently expressed context by Cronin, who deconstructs the collision between the authentic and performative versions of the self, in neo-liberal discourse. This subjective contradiction, she argues, is central to the ideology of consumer discourse. It is crystallised in Nike's rhetorical imperative to '*just do it*' which, in their advertising, projects the brand, and by inference the consumer, into 'a zone of pure voluntariness' (Cronin 2000: 273). The '*just do it*' slogan, she argues, simultaneously addresses both a bounded autonomous self as the source of 'free will', as a 'subject', with the self as an 'object' - a more open project something to be worked on - and a yet to unfold, but never the less, actualisable or realisable set of potentials (ibid.).

Thus, she argues, the 'Nike' subject/object is emblematic of Rose's self as 'entrepreneur of herself' (1999:150) because '*just do it*' says both, '*just be yourself*' and, '*just do yourself*' (ibid.:279). Cronin's point, here, is that behind the plenitude of the abstraction, it is Western white middle class rational man who has primary possession of both the individual entitlement, and resources, to inhabit this 'zone of voluntariness.' It

is he, therefore, who can most easily afford, 'to depart from, and return to, an ideal of unitary identity which frames the self's potential' (ibid.: 278). The results so far surely underscore this argument. For any such to-ing and fro-ing of the self, or explorations in the 'zone of pure voluntariness', to be properly understood, they must be grounded subjectively. Only by circumspect consideration of the embodied psycho-social dimensions of class and gender experience, and of the differential emotional terrain and burden of psychic, emotional and social risks this instantiates, can the 'zone of pure voluntariness' or agency, which surrounds the neo-liberal choosing self be understood.

### **1.3 Dilemmatic thinking, embodiment and emotion**

Before outlining the emotional economy of consuming brands, I want to briefly reiterate the argument made earlier about the relationship between reflexive thought, embodiment and emotion. One of the most important arguments I have introduced, into the frame of analysis, has centred on the recognition, and application, of the concept of consciousness as 'contradictory', and of thought being reflexive and dilemmatic. In line with Billig's arguments (1988), I have suggested the way these young people think about brands and consumption, particularly in relation to ideas about both their self and other people's identities, drew on the range of ideas in wider public circulation. However, as I have continually stressed, subjective individual take up of elements of these discourses, was shaped by a combination of class and gender. In particular the series of classifying categories, types and semiotic condensations to do with identity, social worth, status and respectability, outlined in the previous chapters, contributed to their embodied experience of consumption, in class and gender terms.

I have therefore argued, commitment to a degree of reflexivity does not mean subscribing uncritically to the kind of disembodied, 'hyper rationalist', individualised and reflexive self agent, Giddens and Beck describe. I have stressed the need to explore the production and experience of emotions, and their subjective meaning and 'psychic costs', which Beck's work in particular ignores, as Elliot argues (2002:12). As well as this, I highlighted Elliot's criticism of the voluntarism of Giddens' arguments, with regard to the transformation of self-identity. Skeggs (2004) was even more forthright in her criticisms of the 'class resource' based nature of the concept of the self reflexive agent, and this argument was developed by Cronin (2000), in relation to the Nike brand above.

However, these criticisms of abstract voluntarism should not mean we turn away from the concept of reflexivity per se. Nor should the further critique I developed of the reductively cognitive approach to agency, lead us to throw the baby out with the bath water. This critique suggested, structuration theory overplayed rational calculation, down played emotional risk and costs, and ignored the pre-epistemic elements of corporeal perception. Charlesworth, as we saw, powerfully exposed the weaknesses of this overly rational cognitive bias in his study of the phenomenology of working class experience (2000). Despite these criticisms, any such substantive move away from the concept of reflexivity, if executed, could mean we switch, as Elliot puts it, to a view of processes of subjectification which echo the dead end Frankfurt school vision of “the totally administered society” (2002: 17). As I argued in **Chapter Two**, such a move led to a type of functionalism in the work of Rose, who following Foucault, tended to overplay the seamlessness of neo-liberal attempts to ‘reengineer the self.’ Rose’s analysis of the bourgeois consuming subject, the ‘compulsory individual’ as Cronin describes it, cannot account for versions of the self, and concepts of identity, which exist outside the structures of official power knowledge. The limitation in this work, I argued, was rooted in Foucault’s work on discourse and discursive regimes. For Billig (1996), his work suffered from a cognitivist tendency, to ignore contradictions and, to seal subjects into historically conditioned modes of thought.

The problems with concepts of reflexivity and cognition were, I argued, twofold. Firstly, the tendency to present thought and consciousness as too schematic, univalent and disembodied from the contradictions of everyday life, and its plethora of competing ideologies. And secondly, to sideline the emotions, or to file them away as purely subjective and universal features of an essential biological self, in the manner of the Cartesian dichotomy. However, as I argued in 2(2.6 to 8), conscious reflexivity doesn’t have to be theorised in this way. Vygotsky located consciousness and reflexivity differently as neither reducible to - nor separate from - environment, historical moment and physical experience. The dialectical tension between embodied experience, reflexive thoughts and our emotional make up, and subjective experience of the self, emerges strongly in the results which follow. Developing a practice based theory of the self and identity, Holland et al (1998) concur with this approach. In particular they

stress the importance Vygotsky attached to reflexivity, through the use of concepts as symbolic mediation, and as tools, which could facilitate a degree of agency.

Persons develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds, and these senses of themselves, these identities, to the degree that they are conscious and objectified, permit these persons, through the kinds of semiotic mediation described by Vygotsky, at least a modicum of agency or control over their behaviour. (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain 1998: 40)

## 2. The emotional economy of consumption

### Anxiety and Fear

#### 2.1 Failure and getting it wrong - *trying to be the big boy*

In the analysis which follows, I will chart the emotional terrain, and economy, which emerges across the focus groups, in relation to consuming brands. I will argue, that the range of emotions attached to consuming brands hinges on two interrelated experiences which pervade young people's discussions: a 'see saw' of anxiety and fear, and of, self-esteem and self-worth. I will then move on to consider the related conflict between performative and authentic versions of the self, and thus between self as image, and as character, or personality, with depth. To begin with, I'll look more closely at two extracts from group [10.WM], four young men, two black and two Asian, all FE students from Walthamstow. Their discussion focuses on the story J, tells them, about his decision to buy a pair of Nike Cortez trainers, and how the response he wanted from his friends was not the response he got. Told in a confessional mode, very similar to the revelations made by TI in group [19.WSW], it is a narrative shaped by hope of social success and fear of social failure.

#### [10.WM]

**J16** Well er (T Yeah) I bought a pair of trainers once (T Yeah) just cos they were Nike but I didn't really like the shape of them

**S** Ha ha ha

**J** Yeah they were like (S Ha ha ha) called Cortez's like

**S**

And I only liked them cos of the colour of them and they were Nike

**J** I just I thought to my friends I was big boy like Ha ha ha

**S** Did it work?

**J** No

**ALL** Ha ha ha ha

**J**  
**ALL**

Ha he they didn't like em either

Ha ha ha ha he

**J**'s motives for buying Nike depend on his desire to appear 'a big boy' to his friends and to successfully gain their approval. This means he is prepared to take a risk by buying trainers which he's not sure about, but which he thinks will earn him respect socially. Crucially, this is because, 'Nike' has established itself for many young people as the, 'up to the standard brand'. When things don't work out **J**'s register, evidenced by his laughter, 'I was big boy like ha ha', and the forthrightness with which he confesses to his social faux pas, indicates this wasn't such a social disaster after all. In **J**'s case a good deal of the anxiety felt about choosing the Cortez trainers, which he subsequently discovers are much derided, is discharged by his own laughter which also cues his comrades. Such an ironic disposition towards the miscalculation of taste, and the thwarting of subjective emotional investment, is far from the only response, however.

## **2.2 Exclusion and the draw of the middle ground-It's all in the bag?**

What lies behind getting both the choice of brand, and how you wear it, right for many teenagers is a desire not to be ignored and excluded, because of negative perceptions about their social status inferred from their choice or taste. Amongst Group [3.HM], six young men, all Herts sixth formers, the social cost of getting it wrong is high in terms of their experience of exclusion from groups, as well as the ever present threat of being bullied.

**R6** I think you portray a certain image with brands and that erm like what you said about Luis Vuitton bags I find like that like people who wear them want to look wealthy and that (T mm) in that sort of bag

**A** I think there are bags that can exclude people as well

**T** Exclude go on?

**A** I have had friends like who have er been excluded I've seen its effects

**T** So have you got any erm any examples of that?

**A** Back to like the classic examples of when you're younger really but it still exists

**R** Yeah like you don't wanna go in class cos everyone stares at you and thinks just like ugh

Similar discussions to this take place amongst the young women. In [2.HW], they too, talked about the functional social role designer bags can play for younger girls, by helping to identify, and cohere, friendship groups. Amongst these young men, their discussion explicitly centres on the threat, and experience of, being excluded from such groups. A, though not referring to himself, says he has many friends who have experienced this. Thus the point made in **Chapter Four** about the brands capacity to negatively signify, as badges of exclusion from groups, as well as to act as emblems for membership, to rework Leiss, Klein and Jhally's formulation (1997), seems present here too. Additionally, class and status, once again, make up the boundaries which shape anxiety about what is socially acceptable and transgressive.

If we return to R's solution, discussed earlier in **Chapter Four**, as part of my assessment of the concept of social safety which, 'up to the standard brands' are said to offer, his answer to the dilemma of appearance is to go for an established 'mainstream' brand. This, he hopes, will lessen the chance of being bullied, as it offers the kind of ontological security noted in the introduction above.

R I think that by going with like an established brand you're sort of quite safe like you can't get if you've got an established brand (yeah) if you're wearing well known clothes then you can't sort of get bullied because every one knows that's sort of like mainstream

Going for the perceived safety of the middle ground makes sense to R, given the subjective dichotomy he faces between bags which signal 'wealth', and those which will draw a socially distancing 'ugh'. By going for an 'established' 'mainstream' brand R defensively negotiates a path between the twin class pitfalls of being too posh or too poor. Based on these accounts, which are emblematic of the discussions across the groups, we again return to the class inflected axis of the 'rough and the respectable.' The desire to locate and emotionally invest in the safety of the middle ground, remarked on by R, is also noted by Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody in their research (2001). They argue, the desire for respectability points to the 'contradictory and elusive space of the middle' to avoid, both, class 'others', whether the 'posh' or the 'poor'. Emotional investment is sought in the middle because, as Walkerdine et al put it,

this safe middle, ground not only relies on the actual, discursive or symbolic existence of the pathological poor, but also on its equally feared opposite, the rich. So 'they' can just as powerfully be 'posh', 'stuck up', rich envied for their privilege. (ibid.: 45)

### 2.3 Picked out - Gucci: dilemmas of classy looks and class looking

In group [14.HW] J, one of two young women, both Essex FE students, describes brands as 'not that important to her'. This psychic defence is belied by her comments below, to which I will return later. J clearly finds the whole experience of brands to be a trial. She argues, not wearing designer brands means you can get left out socially. However, just as worryingly, according to J, wearing designer brands can also bring unwelcome attention. J13 begins by observing, 'more people wanna be your friend when you got like designer stuff have you noticed yeah'. K12, the other young woman in the group agrees, 'that's true yeah.' J13, explains, how she is excluded because she doesn't wear designer labels such as Gucci.

J Cos I don't come in with like Gucci trainers on or Gucci whatever people are like they don't wanna like know me or people do wanna know me but you can see they are like backing off

Interestingly, it is the most expensive brands which were picked out here as those to be avoided and *never* bought. As well as the expense involved, K reveals her anxiety about being looked at. This underlines the arguments made in **Chapter Three** about the scopic dimensions of the regulation of taste, through being looked at by a classifying gaze.

#### 1. [11]

J There's more things like er design designer clothes for men

T Yeah which brands would you never wear or buy and why?

K I would never wear any of those [Calvin Klein Skeechers] ha ha ha

J I would never wear

K They are too expensive ha

J I would never wear I would never wear Lacoste

#### 2. [12]

J Well he he I don't really buy brands but if I had like a Gucci scarf and Luis Vuitton I would feel like high class

K I would feel very vulnerable if I wore something like that

T Really go on

**K** Well if there were like people always watching me and thinking oh I could take that I'd be too wer weary about leaving it cos it might

Clearly there are practical reasons why she worries, to do with the possibility of theft. But her discourse is also marked by a greater ambivalence about designer gear per se, and an ostensibly powerful aversion towards it. This, again, suggests she is attempting to safely negotiate the class dilemma between, 'the rough and the respectable'. There is one final point to be mentioned here. **J** and **K** are two young black women but their discussions, along with those elsewhere, *cf* 4(3.1 to 3.5), show, once again, their understanding of the subjective meanings of brands is just as infused with concerns about perceptions of class position, and status anxiety, as white group members. The commonalities of subjective class experience across 'race' (as well as the differences and inflections), feature strongly in group [9.WWMX]. I will return to the racialised dynamics of class and consumption, in the conclusion.

#### **2.4 Picked on - Young black men: 'thugged out' or 'stacked'?**

If we switch to [9.WWMX], which was made up of seven young FE students from Walthamstow, four young black women, and three young men, one Asian and one black, social-esteem is revealed as a series of feelings which emerge from the practice of being praised, and esteemed, by others, for the designer clothes you wear. As such it is a practice which comes with 'unequal risks and burdens', socially and psychically, not just in class and gender terms but in terms of race too. In the example below, we hear a graphic account of the set of difficulties which face young black and Asian men, when they try to dress decently or 'up to the standard'. As well as being judged by their peers they find themselves being adjudicated, on the 'rough respectable' axis, by the power of the state – the police. Thus, a further variant of the class/gender axis of 'rough versus respectable' appears. This demonstrates the perniciousness of the race inflected dilemma of being young and black, and being seen as either, 'thugged out' or, 'stacked'.

**Sad22/23** You do get judged think cos about it (T Yeah) ... police yeah (T Yeah) if you've got your hood up yeah you got people that wear their hood up and wear their hood over their hats and so and so you know (T Yeah) how people look cos of the way you look that's why boy police pull you over (T Yeah) do you know what I'm trying to say like cos on Halloween yeah (T Yeah yeah) these boys my friends got stopped and they were saying that when they got stopped yeah they was like a bunch of white boys across the road yeah and

they must went like yeah go and stop them go and stop them and the police goes no we're stopping you cos your black (T Yeah) like blatantly said that ...

**T** Do you think that brands give them an excuse to stop people then **Sad**?

**Sad** Well it does cos the basic rule now people that look nowadays well anyway nowadays most people you can tell someone if they're you know if they look a bit you know cos of the way they dress

**C** **Thugged out**

**T** Mm mm so what what do you think would make you likely to be stopped you were talking about earlier having your hood up but what about brands would any brands make you more likely do you think?

**Sad** Yeah actually (T Go on) it can because if you think about it jewelry wise yeah if you got no job and everything yeah and your busting the biggest chain and whatever (T Yeah) you know what I'm trying to say like something that proper stands out cos that's what it is brand names do stand out like when you see someone wearing a brand name you can tell that that their **stacked** you know what I'm saying so if you want [*Indecipherable*] something to stand out but that attracts polices eye more cos they can look at you

Here 'compulsory individuality' takes on a new coercive twist as the structural social contradictions inherent in consuming brands, despite their presentation as 'zones of pure voluntariness', (Cronin 2000) shatter the promise of choice as self-invention and destiny. Compulsion in this case, concerns not the obligation to choose, but the coercive regulation of some choosers, those who are young, black and working class. For these young people, the signs of their free choice are read as something very different - the stigmata of deviance. The source of anxiety, in the case of these young men, turns on the fear of being caught in the objectifying racially classifying gaze of the police, and of being stopped, because you were trying to 'stand out.' This adds another dimension to the experience of Giddens' dilemma between 'a personalised and commodified experience of the self' - that of race - to that of class and gender. It also adds race, as well as gender, to class in Bourdieu's dictum, 'class classifies and it classifies the classifier'. Once again, however, it is worth reiterating how much the emotional dimensions of class anxiety drive these young men's quest, through dress, to establish their sense of self respect and esteem, and the respect and esteem of others. It is a cruel irony that like the white 'Essex scum' vilified in **Chapter Four**, their choice of dress - part of the visible signs of a black and Asian working class habitus - is also

turned, if much more forcefully, into a set of 'negative distinctions' (Charlesworth 2000:157).

## **2.5 Humiliation & Shame: Hi-Tec that's what the tramps wear aint it?**

Finally, in group [20.WSM], we can see how anxiety about class position, status and fear of social failure and exclusion converge. **R** begins by explaining the high expectations which are placed on his peers to invest in their image, and to present themselves decently, by dressing in the latest Nike lines. In the second extract, **R** explains how these expectations work, and the importance of getting the 'right feedback' from one's peers. In the third extract, **R** describes, how insecurity affects particular kinds of people, whom he labels as insecure per se, he, of course, is not one of them. The fourth and last extract details the harsh consequences which await those who flout the expectation to be in fashion and who are 'not wearing the right type of clothing'. This includes, **Te** explains, being taunted with abusive songs, with 'Hi-Tec' again signifying the benighted condition of its wearers as declassed tramps.

**1. R6** And I think (**Te** Yeah) the expectation of something else like cos everyone say like Nike for instance was in trend everyone is expected to be like in fashion (**Z** Yeah) and wear Nike so they're like expecting to pay more so say if someone can't afford it they they might be embarrassed to say if they're not wearing the right type of clothing and stuff

**2. R8** Sorry sometimes I agree someone might come in with like say a Gucci pair of trainers and then everyone is like yeah oh them they are heavy like

**Te**

Yeah yeah that's it

**R** Stuff like that so they expect a certain feedback from other people when they

**Z**

When they buy the trainers innit

**R**

Yeah

**R** is keen to point out the importance of feelings of insecurity in this, whilst distancing such feelings from himself, by using the third person, 'some people', or the category, 'insecure people'. The use of such distancing devices as aspects of psychic defence, and their underpinning by the fear of being classified, or cast as 'other', is a common feature across the group discussions. I will return to its significance in the conclusion.

**3. R7** Yeah like insecure people might be obliged to buy brand names more than secure people cos they they think they have to like have to buy it (T Yeah) cos otherwise they're not gonna like (Te Yeah yeah) be in fashion or otherwise they are not gonna get into the groups and stuff

What now follows is the detailed elaboration of the social punishment meted out to those to whom pariah status is attached, for either not wearing well known brand names, or getting their 'choice' of clothing wrong. The social ostracism, described here, contains many of the objectifying processes outlined earlier on, including processes of social distancing and pejorative classed classification of others. Here they emerge and converge. Before turning to this extract, it is worth reminding ourselves of the comments made by Walkerdine et al, as to the role of class in the judgement of taste amongst their research interviewees. 'From house to dress, from accent to appearance, Eliza Dolittle is as present in the early twenty-first century as she was in the nineteenth' (2001:53).

**4. Z8** just say you got a brand that's not known basically and then you might be afraid that other people might you know take the mickey out of you (R Yeah) and that

**R** Like no one one would would ever wear a Hi-Tec pair of trainers (Z No not no not in) in this college cos they know everyone would start laughing

**Z** Exactly that's the main thing

**T** What about that Hi-Tec then do you know an example of that at school or college or whatever

**Te** I know I know there there's people from my secondary school and there was there was a song actually made to insult people that wore them

**T** There was a what sorry?

**Te** A song  
A

**J** A song made up?

**Te** Yeah to insult people that wore Hi-Tec trainers

**T** Can you do it?

**Te** No (T Can you do it?) no I don't I don't member but it was it was like er it was *oh why are you wearing Hi-Tec that's what the tramps wear ain't it* like something like that and some more lines repeated them them over and like people who whoever come came in wearing

Hi-Tec (Z Yeah) wearing Hi-Tec sorry (Z Yeah) was insulted like and made to feel bad about themselves afterwards

T Is that Hi-Tec trainers?

Te Yeah Hi-Tec

When the group members are asked where, and when, they thought bullying over brands was most rife, Z argues, it was most common in primary school, but as far as he's concerned teenagers were the worst.

Z The teenagers of twelve to sixteen that's where most of the bullying takes place as well

R Yeah

T Do you think bullying is an issue around brands

Te Yeah definitely yeah

R De definitely it is

T Can you tell us about anything that you remember seeing that or?

Te No like that's just there's just erm

R People get insulted like oh you can't afford to buy proper trainers (Te Yeah) and that stuff

T Yeah a bit a bit like the song

R Then they go for your parents as well like '*your parents are poor*'

Z Yeah yeah example

R Your family as well

What comes across strongly here is how the expectation to wear the right thing is accompanied by fear of having 'the mickey taken out of you', as Z8 puts it, which strengthens the processes of discursive and scopic social distancing. These processes are underwritten by a battery of 'psychic defences' including denial, splitting off, projecting and displacing those fears onto class and gendered others (Walkerdine et al *ibid.*: 89-92). Thus, Z's emphatic modality of aversion to 'Hi-Tec', 'no not no not in [this college]', illustrates his aversion and the psycho-social dynamics of attempts at social distancing from such aesthetically disastrous choices. Again, although R says, he is not affected by feelings of insecurity - they clearly affect other people.

Reading this series of extracts again, I am struck by three things. Firstly, the relentless focus on class position, with being poor and a tramp constituting the ultimate insult. Secondly, the emotional economy which centres here on anxiety about class and social

status, the role of fear of humiliation and the actual practices of humiliation, which are again strongly class inflected, as in the 'Hi-Tec' tramp song. Thirdly, that these practices of exclusion, which surround consumption, and which alternate or 'see saw' between esteeming and respecting others for their good taste, and hence attributing positive social value to some, whilst denigrating others who can't make the standard - are typical of those recounted. In addition there is the constantly unfolding presence of elements of psychic defence, and sometimes this is made painfully conscious. All too often, the suffering entailed by abuse centring on class position, status and social worth, is split and projected. It is said to be both carried out, and suffered by, third party figures so that 'people', for example, 'get insulted', whilst 'others' are affected.

The prevalence of such aversive discursive social distancing demonstrates the expenditure of considerable emotional energy splitting off, and projecting away anything, whether choice, taste or object, which might connect these discussants to the 'rough', 'poor' or 'tramp' working class. Wilkinson (2004) argues, macro level analysis of the social structure in terms of statistics and trends can't get to grips with our subjective 'vulnerability' to the psychic stress and damage which is caused by anxiety over class position and social status in Britain, which is one of the most unequal societies in the world (ibid.). Here, by contrast, the empirical detail of how fear, anxiety, humiliation and denigration converge, psycho-socially, to thoroughly permeate the subjective emotional experience of consuming brands, is laid bare in all its ugliness.

### ***Self worth and esteem as a social practice***

#### **3.1 Feeling uplifted, better, bigger and stronger**

Harré argues 'the basic problem for a person in society is to be recognised as of worth' (1979:25 quoted in Charlesworth 2000:271). Rather than esteem simply describing a discrete category of feeling, located within the self, as is often inferred in traditional psychological accounts, it appears here to emerge from a combination of a range of embodied experiences and practices attached to wearing certain branded items of clothing, and the responses which these call forth socially.

What is particularly noticeable in group [10.WM], which was made up of four young men, all FE Students in Walthamstow, is how feelings of self-worth or self-esteem, 'feeling uplifted', as M puts it below, cannot be separated from the much more

physically embodied social experience of standing out and feeling strong like a 'big man', as **J** describes his feelings about donning his favourite Avirex top. **J** also describes wearing Avirex as making him 'feel better about himself', and **M** says, wearing Timberlands makes him 'just feel strong'. It is also important to note that for **J** feeling like a 'big man' is also linked to standing out in the crowd. Though none of these young men make an explicit reference to the concept of self-esteem, these everyday experiences and the combination of embodied feelings, seen below, represent, I would suggest, the day to day manifestation of self-worth and self-esteem. When **J** tells us wearing Avirex makes him feel 'much better' about himself; when **M** says he feels 'uplifted' and strong, we should also be asking what has happened to these young men? And, we should be asking why they both need and seek such betterment, uplift and strength from a designer top and a pair of boots? These are questions I will return to in the conclusion.

[10.WM 17]

**M** What like Nike? (**T** Yeah) for me (**T** Yeah) I feel like just uplifting just uplifting just like it is just like action

**T** Yeah uplifting and active yeah anyone else got anything that they would add to that uplifting active

**J** Erm when I wear my Avirex top I feel like I stand out in the crowd (**T** Yeah) and kind of like I dunno like a big man

**S** He he

**T** Yeah okay erm

**J** That's probably the reason I wear it

**T** Okay would that

**J** It makes me feel much better about myself

**T** It makes you feel better about yourself yeah what do other people think

**M** Yes it's just like Timberlands

**S** He he he he

**T** What does that what does that feel like when you get your new new Timberland boots on or top or whatever?

**M** You just feel strong you just feel like **yeah** man

**TJ** Yeah I agree about the Timberlands

In focus group [11.WM], the embodied dimensions of dressing in designer brands as part of a disposition or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1986), and as a way of 'being in the world' (Heidegger 1962), is again reinforced. 'Big' is again prominent in the lexicon of experience associated with feeling good. This time the class element clearly appears also with 'big' acting as a synonym for 'rich' or 'upper class'. Along with this class element their discourse also supports the view that branded consumption is, in part at least, about social symbolic interaction (Mead 1934 and Cooley [1902] 1922). From the symbolic interactionist perspective young people look at each other to provide confirmation of their own acceptability, decency and normality. They in turn look at others, seeking the same social affirmation. Turning to their discourse B tells the group, 'I put on a Nike top yeah tomorrow...people you know they gonna take you like a big man.' However, as I have stressed, the embodied element that they also articulate, particularly in the repetition of 'big', registers an experience of interaction which goes beyond the symbolic.

Consuming brands is not therefore an abstract discursive matter of individuals decoding signs. It rests heavily on creating a deeper corporeal sense of, what Bourdieu (1986) calls, 'ontological complicity' between people. Branded goods can, therefore, help to instantiate a common way of being through dress and other forms of comportment more generally. However, what is judged decent and normal, and thus the setting and maintenance of social boundaries, still hinges on predominantly class inflected dispositions and perceptions of taste. Such adjudications continue to be made, therefore, on distinctively class based perceptions of both the self, and other's, position and worth. Ontological complicity, which emerges out of a gradual inculcation into a class habitus, explains much about why some forms of dress, and ways of wearing them develop, and why they are so emotionally invested by some young people, and yet so decisively rejected, and stigmatised, by others. I am thinking here of what lies behind the expression 'ugh' and the class axis of 'the rough and respectable', and how this shapes reaction to 'Essex boys' in their Burberry hats or 'Essex girls' in white puffa jackets. I think it is only with reference to the phenomenology of comportment, and the class habitus it realises, that the inordinately bitter aversive response to aspects of 'Townies' embodied dress practices, from 'wearing Nickelson' to 'tipping their Nike hats up' can be understood.

The notion of ‘bigging yourself up’,” an everyday cliché used by **B17** below, encapsulates both the social anxiety which consumption perpetuates, and the promise of respite from anxiety, which it also brings. Again it, illustrates, the embodied character of the emotions which these young men speak of, and which I would argue shape their sense of self-esteem.

**B17** Sometimes because because erm people they wear brands yeah you know you know they want to big their selves up yeah you know big you know (T Yeah) yeah you know

**M**

Yeah they think they are a top class person

**B** Yeah they think that they they are big you know and they

**M** They are above everyone else

**B** Yeah that's not good you know

**T** That's not good

**B** No

**T** No no so you get people that think they are the top person?

//////

**B** Because yeah always you have new things know you know and new things like new brands you know today I put on a Nike top yeah tomorrow I put on a Puma top yeah Adidas you know yeah (T Yeah) people you know they're gonna take you like a big man innit

### 3.2 Feeling Comfortable

As I stressed earlier, one of the major limitations of the work I have reviewed on consumption, and in particular on the consumption of branded goods, is its mistaken tendency to do two things. Firstly, to overplay the dematerialization of goods (Slater 1997), which means commodities lose their ontological multi-dimensionality, namely their materiality, and secondly, to disembodify the consumer. In the light of these criticisms, it is significant that ‘comfort’ emerges as another central category descriptor of what it is that makes branded goods appealing. The following discussion, which takes place in focus group [18.WSM], provides us with a good example of the highly embodied feeling of comfort.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> It should be added, the point is not to argue that comfort isn't also a result of affiliation to brands for their symbolic meanings, their operation as commodity signs (Goldman and Papson 1998) and of the desire to associate with the brands for their symbolic or totemic powers. Rather it is to argue that to

**Y14** Would you wear fake labels?

**A** No

**Y** If it looked good enough yeah

**T** If it looked good

**Y** Yeah... why not cos they all the same not trainers though

**T**

You'd draw the line at trainers

**Y** Yeah

**T** Anything else you wouldn't wear fake?

**Y**

It depends

**T** So you would wear some though?

**Y** Yeah cos trainers it's about comfort for me

**[15]**

**T**

Right okay then so let's have a look what does erm how does wearing your favourite brand actually make you feel you get something that you really

**M** Comfortable

**Y** Comfortable it's an unconscious thing I don't think you really see it but some when you get something that's really nice that's when you feel it

In [10.WM] a group of four young men, all college students from Walthamstow, two black and two of whom were Asian, a state of being comfortable again seems to ground their feelings about which branded clothing and footwear to buy. What seems clear here is that this feeling of comfort is primarily about being comfortable around others. Thus, comfort, as an emotion, seems very much an embodied pre-epistemic feeling of relief from the kind of rational conscious reflexivity which Giddens (1990) (1991), Beck (1992) and others, place at the centre of their analysis of self-identity. Feeling comfortable occurs if, according to **D**, you wear clothes which relieve you of the pressures of being 'self-conscious', and the anxiety of continually monitoring your self and appearance. **J**'s comments echo the young man from the Basildon focus group who describes the embodied nature of the 'ease' he felt, walking 'through the crowd' wearing Nike.

**J23** I feel that if you're wearing clothes that you are comfortable in you are going to feel comfortable around the people ( **T** Yeah) because you know that with these clothes on you are comfortable you are not worried about your image then ( **T** Yeah) cos you know you are in comfortable clothes ( **T** Yeah)

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understand branded consumption we need to re-engage with the materiality of consumer goods as 'lumpy objects' (Klein 2000) which are a part of 'material culture' (Dant 2002).

whereas if you are wearing stuff that you know like you are self conscious about (T Yeah) you are constantly gonna be 'oh look at my clothes and all' and they are gonna think 'what a weirdo'

**S** He he he

**J** I don't wanna know him? So you gotta be in clothes that you are comfortable in kind of thing

### 3.3 Feeling Proud – 'Happy the way you're walking'

[11.WM]

**T7**... what's good about brands?

**B** It's the mark init

**T** The mark

**B** Yeah

**M** You feel proud wearing them

**T** You feel proud wearing them

**M** Yeah

**T** Yeah go can you say anything more about that go on what do other people think do you all agree?

**J O B M** Yeah yeah

**T** Yeah you you feel proud do you feel anything else?

**M** You feel happy the way you're walking you know

For these young men from an FE college in Walthamstow, clearly walking proud is another important embodied part of the experience of wearing brands. In several groups, young people talk of, as they put it, 'walking the road' and feeling much more confident about doing this, if they are wearing the right kind of branded clothes. Later on in group [11.WM], **O** explains, that above all he does not want to go, 'on the road looking like tramp.' Again what is being illustrated here is the kind of relationship to branded clothing which stresses 'how the body is experienced and lived' (Entwhistle 2000:38-39). Their feelings of being proud emanate, I would argue, from achieving in their dress, the class, race and gender infused status of respectability via 'ontological complicity', which when translated into their own spontaneous terminology is articulated as wearing, 'up to the standard brands'.

Such an achievement is, therefore, not just a cognitive reflexive matter of thinking about, and displaying the right symbols. The relationship is a much deeper one ontologically, with dress and all of its details, coming to form a part of an embodied, somatically experienced feeling of safety in a common class, gender and race

disposition or habitus. The development of this has been extensively surveyed across this study and elsewhere, notably in the work of Charlesworth, who argues, following Merleau-Ponty (1964:118), that it is such pre-consciously adopted 'posturally impregnated' orientations, manifest in bodily gesture, posture, speech and other forms of disposition, which create the 'ontological complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:20) and social safety between working class people.

In this section, so far, we have seen some of the fine detail of how this feeling of safety comes to be felt as an embodied experience of 'bigness', 'walking proud' and being 'comfortable', and how these feelings, however temporarily, and contradictorily, can assuage anxiety. However, fear of failure and of being excluded socially, of being socially humiliated and bullied, are never far away, as we saw with the accounts given by both the young women in group [14.HEW] and the young men in [20.WSM]. Yet it is within this very series of socially formed emotional practices and embodied investments in brands, that the very real antagonisms and dilemmas faced by young people are played out. It is their anxiety over identity, in relation to their social status, location and position, which pulls them down. Yet simultaneously, such anxiety, lays the basis for the feelings of being uplifted, of safety and well being, and of comfort and pride, which however temporarily, they report they experience when they buy and consume the 'right' brands. Self-esteem appears, therefore, as inseparable from a highly commodified set of consumer practices. Thus the fickle nature of feelings of esteem, given that they depend for many young people on acts of consumption, and the social affirmation given by others for the propriety and decency of their taste.

### **3.4 Non-uniform day 'Some people want all the praise'**

Before moving onto the dichotomy between image and personality I want to look at one of the most ubiquitous topics of conversation, talk about non-uniform days in schools which crops up in ten out of twenty groups. It is clearly an important subjective experience, and major social event, in which winning praise, being publicly esteemed for your choice of dress, and avoiding criticism are the two goals. Failure in these respects can make a significant impact, both on the way others feel about you, and the way you feel about yourself. In focus group [19.WSW], which consisted of five young women, all sixth formers, discussion of non-uniform day reveals the lengths they, and

their peers, go to, to make themselves look their best, as well as the high hopes and expectations they have of it.

1.

**J10** ...non-uniform day it was the biggest fashion parade (**S** Yeah everyone) everyone would wear

**L**

The newest designer as well

**S** But sometimes people (**L** Like the most expensive as well) like extend themselves to wear like you know them name brands (**J** I have to go in half an hour please) like erm say

**J** Someone is gonna buy a Gucci dress or something or some Gucci shoes they proper mash up their feet to wear (**J** Yeah yeah) and they walk they can't walk (**TI** Yeah yeah) and then they end up breaking their ankles

**S** Yeah well that's

**J** That's why that's why designers like Shelley's who are actually a designer shoe shop but aren't like Gucci Prada this sort they're coming into fashion (**S** Yeah) cos they make comfortable shoes that look really good

**S** Yeah it's like people wear itchy jumpers and

**J**

Yeah no I can't do that ha ha

Despite their agreement that the pressure is on to 'extend themselves', as **S** puts it, matters are not so straightforward. These young women are also able to maintain an ironic critical disposition towards the event which suggests, that on days like this, many elements of their contradictory dispositions towards brands converge. Thus for **L**, 'the newest designer gear must be on display. But for **J**, this means someone is gonna 'proper mash up their feet' wearing Gucci shoes. For **J**, therefore, there are limits to what she is prepared to do to win a favourable response. Thus, if it means too much of a sacrifice of bodily comfort then, both for her and **S**, this is not a price worth paying. **S** tells the rest of the group people wear 'itchy jumpers' to which **J** responds, 'no I can't do that'.

In the next extract we can hear further evidence of these young women's propensity for irony. Here their orientation to the occasion echoes the humorous disposition which **J**, one of the young men from one of the Walthamstow FE groups, [10.WM], displayed. Thus, **TI** jokes, that it is as if **L** has got her 'church clothes' out for the occasion.

Though L disagrees with the analogy, she confesses she wore her best clothes and shoes. S agrees that her trainers would have been specially put aside and saved for this sacred occasion. But perhaps their biggest joke, and the biggest slab of irony, is reserved for the moment when S, J and L collectively realise that all of their schools charged money to take part in the non-uniform day.

## 2. [11]

L I remember cos when I was in like year four or something that's when we had non-uniform cos I have been to a non-uniform school most of my life yeah but when I did have a non-uniform day boy I made sure I wore my best clothes

TI Ha ha ha your church clothes ha ha ha you wear like to go out ha ha

L Yeah ha ha ha yeah all like that okay

TI Ha ha ha

L No but I did wear my best clothes and my best shoes yeah and

TI And your brand new trainers

S That you knew for a month (L Yeah) that you knew non uniform day was coming so you didn't even wear them

L Yeah

J So you save them up

L Yeah yeah it was funny

S The thing is school can make a profit out of that as well cos they are kinda charging

L Yeah they charge you too

J Mine used to charge one pound

3. Later on however the ironies of the situation are overshadowed by a shift in the focus and tone of the discussion to the crucial social function non-uniform day serves, namely to secure social approval for your style. As S infers, non-uniform days are about getting, or perhaps more specifically, 'drawing praise', for what you wear. This idea of praise being drawn is, I would argue, crucial to establishing the expectations of feeling successful and confident on the day. These feelings of well being are clearly linked by these, and other young people, to social success at choosing and consuming brands. However, such a channelling of feelings of esteem via consumption, is fraught with the

difficulties noted above. These range from anxiety about the possibility of failure, to the fear of humiliation and social exclusion, which beckons, if things go wrong.

**F** Some people like it if someone else wears it because then you know you have style (**J** It depends) with what your wearing

**J** It depends if it's something very out these and some one else wears it because you know you like yes

**S** It's sort of like some people want to be like the only one that gets praised (**TI** Yeah) it's like you come in and like it's I like your trainers I like your trainers yeah you see the next person... .. it's kind of like it's drawn now

**TI** Yeah like it's gone

**S** It's gone

**F** If you bought it first then it's alright kind of thing but if you didn't it's gone

Thus, the notion of 'drawing praise' and of praise forlornly being 'gone' when someone else beats you to it, and it has already been 'drawn', follows a pattern of comments across the groups. Such discourse indexes the high emotional investment in consumption, and the high hopes and expectations of positive responses or 'feedback', which develop around what is worn. This kind of emotional investment in consuming brands means many young men and women designate praise and approval from their peers, for their consumer tastes and choices, as the key to their feelings of self-esteem. But by tying self-esteem to wearing particular brands of clothing, footwear, cosmetics and other accessories, and even more so to the practice of being 'the first to wear' and 'drawing praise', they also, therefore, tie themselves to an experience of the self mediated by commodities.

This suggestion that they are being pulled towards, if not onto, the commodified horn of the dilemma of self-experience, which Giddens writes of, is of course not always the case, all of the time. As we have seen, there is much evidence to the contrary, in the range of contradictory dispositions towards, and criticisms of, brands and branding, outlined earlier. However, in this group of young women, the humorous ironic element to their disposition fades. In its place a more lachrymose outlook takes hold, which is based on the pressure to consume competently and to thus win the approval of, and be praised and esteemed by, their classmates. If such praise contributes so much to feelings of self-esteem the problem is, that like any other product under neo-liberal conditions, it is but one more commodity whose shelf life is limited, and whose value is

ultimately only an effect of its position in the market place, and of its availability in terms of supply. What is emerging then in these results is a view of self-esteem considerably at variance with its presumed status as a discrete psychic attribute. Rather, here, self-esteem appears as very much a set of outcomes of particular cultural practices, which are intimately tied in with the subjective and social experience of consumption, in relation to anxieties about class position and status. As Despret argued our emotional makeup is a matter of 'versions' and 'visions' in which 'practices produce the notions of our traditions' (ibid.: 16).

### 3.5 GP's Furry Kangol hat

Finally, in this section, I want to look at the story of GP, a young man who came in to his school's non-uniform day in a furry Kangol hat. In order to get across something of the complex mixture of the thoughts and emotions, which make up experience of non-uniform day for these young men, in group [16.WSM], all sixth formers from Walthamstow, I have included a continuous extract of their discourse below.

#### 4. [16.WSM] [25]

A Part of growing up it has to be

D And when you're at school as well the people you see at school you see the same people every day and it's everyone wearing the same thing school uniform so if you wanna stand out in any way you have (H Mm) to have a nice jacket you have to have nice accessories you know nice jewelry nice hat

H Especially when it's non-uniform day

D Oh

H Especially when it's non-uniform day

D Oh yeah (A That was bad man) I used to plan non-uniform day for ages

H I used to most of the

D Right (H Yeah) I used to go to the dry cleaners to get all my stuff clean

H Just to show people that despite the fact that you wear uniform you still got the money to get good clothes

D Like like when I saw people

T So despite all the efforts to get people to wear uniform the day that you don't wear uniform is the day that the truth comes out

H Yeah

D Every ones (W Yeah I) every (H Every) every you know everyone's everyone's

A Everyone tries to make it their best

D You know everyone's dressed up in their best

A Like Mackenzie hoodies and that on

D We had this guy called GP he turned up and he was so and er he turned up in this you know them like furry Kangol hats (W Yeah yeah he he he) he looks like an idiot you know he thought about it so long and so hard and he'd spent so much money on this hat everyone could see that

A I've got one thing that proves how important young kids are er brands are to young kids yeah when I was at school one of the non-uniform days I think I was actually in year nine or year ten someone actually came in they forgot like it was non-uniform day they wore the uniform innit they actually went home crying

D Yeah yeah

H Yeah

D That's true you always get a few who (W Yeah yeah) turn up in their uniform and you just go *ah oh no or ah they couldn't afford to pay the card* (ALL He he he) to

A No the thing is yeah (ALL Ha ha ha) if I forget yeah and I came to school I just go good take your tie off innit like

H The best thing about that is like people remember that (D Yeah) for a very long time so they

D Can hold it against you

T So they hold that against you they see what you look like

H Yeah

A That's school innit school's *ssws swss swss* (*whispering noise*)

D Yeah everyone remembers GP as that kid with the stupid hat on ha ha

H Yeah and that's yeah you gonna be remembered by so basically like the reason why people dress to impress on occasions non-uniform days so that people remember them as them having good clothes

Given the initial critical commentary, I gave on the subjective emotional cost of learning to consume, in the conclusion of **Chapter Five**, it is interesting that A, prefaces his contributions to the discussion of non-uniform day with the comment, it's 'part of growing up.' The almost breathless enthusiasm, with which they greet the

chance to 'dress their best' and 'to dress to impress', is made clear from their reports of the planning and cleaning which precedes it. This echoes the elaborate preparation seen in the previous group, the young women in [19.WSM]. Though ostensibly about peer rivalry, one of the key underlying sources of this competitiveness soon emerges. **H** introduces concerns about social status into the discussion since for him one of the main functions of non-uniform day is to show, one and all, that despite the fact you ordinarily wear your school uniform, 'you still got the money to get good clothes.' **D** and **A**, with **W** and **H**'s agreement, illustrate the high social stakes by repeatedly pushing the line that, 'you know everyone' is trying to 'make it their best.' But of course contrary to Nike's hyper voluntarist invocation to '*just do it*' (Cronin 2000) even trying your very hardest doesn't guarantee social success.

**D** We had this guy called **GP** he turned up and he was so and er he turned up in this you know them like furry Kangol hats (**W** Yeah yeah he he he) he looks like an idiot you know he thought about it so long and hard and he'd spent so much money on this hat everyone could see that

One of the most significant points to be made here concerns the strength of **D**'s psychically defensive invective against **GP**, which, in particular, condemns him for putting so much thought into his choice, and for investing so much emotional, cultural as well as financial capital in the hat.<sup>135</sup> The problem with non-uniform day as public performance, is that like any other similar display, the bigger the risk taken to stand out positively, the greater the damage socially if things go awry. As Harré argues, failure 'is defined reciprocally to the success from which one gains respect and dignity, and it is marked by humiliation' (Harré 1979 in Charlesworth 2000:271). If such a choice of apparel turns out to be a mistake, this failure will be all the more amplified. In the case of **GP**, **D** tells us, everyone remembers him as 'that kid with the stupid hat on'.

Perhaps **GP** was able ironically, critically or creatively to manipulate his actions into a minor social triumph, to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, whether at the time or in retrospect, we don't know. However, what we do know is some of those who forgot it was non-uniform day 'went home crying'. Thus according to **A**, 'you always get a few who (**W** Yeah yeah) turn up in their uniform and you just go, *ah oh no or ahh they couldn't afford to pay the card (ALL He he he he) too.*' Here we can see the consequences of such a failure, for some, will be to have to endure petty derision as

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<sup>135</sup> Presumably he must have spent a lot of money on such a designer accessory.

they are patronised and laughed at. Again, such subjective humiliation is framed through the discourse of class, turning poverty and its effects into an inadequacy of the hapless individuals concerned, rather than a structural social failure. In short, we can see how, the elements of the emotional economy which condition how branded goods are consumed, come together. From the excitement, expectation and anticipation of social affirmation and self-esteem - dressing to impress hopefully brings - to the contrary anxiety, wrought by the fear of getting it wrong and suffering humiliation.

Fear of peer rebuke, delivered through the discourses of social distancing, objectifying and fixing, demonstrates how and why the considerable emotional investment in branded goods is made by so many. It is of necessity predicated upon the high risk of social exposure and public shame for some. For these unfortunate 'others', those who can't afford to dress their best, tastefully, 'up to the standard' or who simply forget, there is only the prospect of denigration not esteem. A says, 'they hold that against you they see what you look like,' 'they' have long memories. Even for those who 'succeed' this time their success is only bought at the price of others' failure. The shadow of social failure is cast wide, deep and long as the legacy of the psychic defences it engenders shows. As A put it, 'that's school ... everyone remembers.' Walkerdine et al argue, in relation to the subjective everyday psycho-social experience of class,

the living out of these marks of [class] difference is filled with desire, longing, anxiety, pain, defence. Class is at once profoundly social and profoundly emotional, and lived in its specificity in particular cultural and geographical locations. (2001:53)

#### **4. Image versus personality**

In the last section we saw how a significant part of these young people's social lives is shaped by an emotional economy which is focused around acts of consumption, and the feelings which become attached to consuming brands. In this section, I want to look at how a series of conflicting concepts, and ideas, about the self emerge in discussion, alongside the kind of embodied feelings about consuming brands which were also talked about above. To begin with, I want to look at how one key dilemma about the self is discussed. This is the acute tension between a view of the self which seems to reduce it to a matter of a series of images, and appearances, versus one which stresses the self as something of more substance and duration, whether as personality or character.

In focus group [6.HEMX], one of the two mixed gender groups, S, one of two young women tries to explain whether she would buy CK, which she has just heard her friend A15 deride as a brand she would never wear because, 'it looks cheap and tacky'.

**S15** Ah see I feel I'm not as shallow as that I I don't not (J No I mean) not buy it cos then I've got I don't not buy something cos of what it says or what the name is... I don't think I'm that shallow cos but then again I ain't shallow enough too cos I ain't buying clothes that I very rarely wear round the house

Here for S, shallow has consistent though contradictory underlying meanings. Shallow is something which you measure yourself against, but which you are also required to be, at certain times. S refers to the pejorative version of the shallow self with which we began, above 6(1.1). But she also refers to the more positive voluntaristic shallow self, that version of the self as required by the increasingly commodified consumption practices of everyday life, the self as mobile, fluid, flexible and reflexive, in Giddens' and Beck's terms. Here then, S is subjectively caught between the contradictory invocations of versions of the self, as subject and object, which Nike's typically consumerist discourse, seeks to engage and address. Firstly, S says she will not *not* buy CK because of its branded status. She argues, she is not so shallow as to *not* buy something just because it has a brand name on it, she doesn't like.<sup>136</sup> Yet secondly, she also thinks she is 'not shallow enough', inferring again, contrarily, that it is not always so bad to be shallow and that this may, at times, be a desirable state of affairs.<sup>137</sup>

Her approach thus illustrates the dilemmatic nature of thought which Billig (1988) conceives of as operating in the most apparently banal yet socially important ways. For S, 'shallow', clearly infers both a lack of depth of thinking, gullibility and a superficial way of being in the world. However, in contradiction to this, 'shallow' can also be the way *to be*, part of the exigencies, and indeed requirements of social life as a consumer. 'Shallow' can be used reflexively as a particular construct of the self, or as a resource, in the terms of social constructionism (Potter and Wetherell 1987), yet for others, the socially distanced and inept, this clearly is not so.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Contrarily implying the constraining action of a deep bounded self.

<sup>137</sup> Presumably because if she were able to be *so* shallow as a superficially fluid self she would quite happily buy CK, as others do, even though she would never be able to wear it around the house, as the deep authentic self cautions.

<sup>138</sup> What also comes across in S's comments is that the pejorative meaning of shallow describes the condition of the typical consumer as 'contrastive other' i.e. the kind of mindless passive materialist we noted in the literature review chapters. However, what emerges still further is that, in line with the

Finally, J also takes up the shallow metaphor to describe her response to the pressure to get the right designer brands and to consume competently. When A29 points out, 'I think you just feel better in yourself like you do like at our age'. J responds, 'I think it sounds a bit shallow though don't it but I think it's the truth.' In these exchanges there is an implicit sense of the awkwardness felt about being seen to be shallow and to rely too much on consumption of brands to signify social affiliations, status or importance. Yet, as we know, this is exactly the predominant framework through which consuming brands is commercially pitched and socially, and subjectively, understood. As we saw with discussions of the human rights abuses of the big brand corporations, an explicit practical disposition emerges, in response to this dilemma, such as that discursively expressed by J. This says, if you want to get by in the world you have no choice, on an everyday level, but to do your best to get the right stuff and wear it - despite any knowledge you may have to the contrary. Once again this is evidence of what Žižek (1989) calls the cynical mode of knowledge. As J29 argues, 'people do look at ya and like you're nothing if you're not wearing really good stuff kind of thing?' Thus we return here to the idea of consciousness as contradictory (Gramsci 1971), capable of both submission and reflexive self-monitoring, as well as naivety, often simultaneously or in short succession. I will return to this discussion of ideology and consciousness in relation to consuming brands in the conclusion.

Amongst the women in [1.WW], J25 argues, brands are not important to her. 'They are not your personality your personality is in your mind not on your clothes.' Here again we can detect the dichotomy between self-identity as deep or superficial, a series of performances in Goffman's terms (1971), or as something more deeply anchored, psychologically located in the person, personality or mind, as a more substantive essence. Again when we look at this particular ontological trope of the self and social influence, the work of Despret (2004) and others is useful. It points us towards the specificity of these 'versions' of the self, and their dilemmas, to capitalism and to neo-liberal consumer discourse in particular. Despret's work thus draws attention to the status of this 'version' of the consuming self as a 'vision', which the institutions of neo-liberal government and the market work relentlessly to 'impose', aiming to close down

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arguments made in the previous chapter such a dichotomy is too reductive since, at times, J feels like just giving in and taking up a submissive disposition towards branded consumption.

alternative possibilities, or 'versions' of the self (ibid.:29-30). The relationship of these tropes to the social, and of these visions of the self to their historical and cultural moment, arises again in [12.WM]. M29 wants to identify a different and deeper kind of experience of the self, outside the mediation of the commodity. M appeals to the concept of humanity as the key to what 'makes a person good'. Again, along with S and J, and J, M is thinking about the self in metaphors of essence and depth, and in tropes of the inner versus the outer, echoing the destructive terms of the Cartesian mind body dualism (Seidler 1994: 153).

**M29** Sometimes I say that erm it's not a quality of the clothes which makes a person good it's a quality of the human which goes to people and talks to people?

**T**

Mm

**M** Yeah that's what I say

**Raz** Yeah but

**T** Yeah

**Raz** Sometimes

**M30** Yeah I know you're right at the same time but it's like some people they are so poor you speak to them (T Yeah) and you speak to them and when you start to know them (T Yeah) you forget about the clothes yeah and you know that you should show them some respect (T Yeah) okay for being other looks of other people

**Raz** Z yeah says like with the opposite person like you know what he just said like with the clothes like making you in a group yeah well it depends on the group is if they are like hearted persons like you get me

What all these examples show is how, at the micro scale of the social, individuals attempt subjectively to come to terms with the kind of the dilemmas of the self which have preoccupied theory in a number of disciplines, and which now have come to prominence as neo-liberal 'technologies of the self'. Perhaps more importantly, I would argue, they also try to come to terms with what it means in their own subjective understanding to be a person, within the terms of Giddens (1991) dilemma between an experience of the self as personalised or commodified. In doing this they also attempt to negotiate the structural obstacles and tensions, which inhere in the disembodied and contradictory invocation to treat themselves as both, agents, or subjects, and as projects or objects of transformation, which Cronin (2000) in particular so skillfully identifies.

## 5. Conclusion - What kind of emotions what kind of selves?

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced the possibility that our 'emotional make up', as Despret (2004) calls it, could be a culturally specific set of categories for thinking our feelings, rather than a universal and ahistorical set of emotions. I also recapped a series of perspectives on, and questions and issues to do with, cognitive, reflexive and embodied approaches to self experience and identity. These spanned, from the overly rational and cognitive focus on the self, as agent, in the structuration theory of Giddens (1990, 1991), to the much more embodied phenomenological approach to the self taken by Charlesworth (2000). One of the key concerns I expressed at the outset, *cf* 1(1.5) and 3(1.1), had to do with the failure of cultural and social theory to engage with people and their emotions, on an embodied subjective level. Walkerdine's work with Lucey and Melody (2001), in particular, was referenced as exposing the limitations of structural work on social structure and class, which ignored the subjective elements of class, and its psychic economy and emotional costs especially.

One of the most powerful themes to emerge from the analysis of the results above is just how relevant and important this subjective approach to class has been. The emotional economy, charted above, tracks the trajectory of experiences and feelings which make up the psychic landscape of consuming brands. Behind the abstractions of both the 'pure voluntariness' of marketing discourse (Cronin 2000) and the voluntarism of some academic theory, this emotional economy details the psychic costs of consumption as a class, gendered and raced experience. Anxiety about social class, position and status, is manifest in every small act, and detail, of these young people's consumption of branded goods.

The production of subjects from all classes and the way in which they live their subjectification centrally involves a constant invitation to consume, to invent, to choose and yet even in the midst of their choice and their consumption class is performed, written all over their every choice. (Walkerdine et al 2001:53)

Consuming brands evokes an extraordinary emotional economy in which fear, exclusion, being picked on, and out, humiliated and shamed, are the necessary down points which regulate, and instantiate, the concomitant up points of social-esteem, the feelings of being uplifted, 'better', 'bigger' and 'stronger', these young people express.

The '*er*' verb endings which emerged discursively can be revealed, in retrospect, as the tell tale signs of the interrelatedness of notions of social success, security and inclusion with those of social failure, insecurity and exclusion. As Harré understands, such feelings are the conceptual flipsides of the same psychically destructive emotional economy which the consuming self propagates. They are, as Despret argues, both the 'vehicles' and 'legacy' (2004:19-20) of the neo-liberal 'vision' (ibid.: 29) of the consuming self.

What emerges from the symbolic violence which imbricates consumption, via the subjective regulation of class through 'taste', is a particular emotional set which, I would argue, belongs ideologically and materially to capitalism in its current neo-liberal global phrase. 'Self-esteem' exemplifies Despret's key argument, that our emotions, 'which to us have always been so obvious, so natural so biological... the very authenticity of which fascinates us' are 'cultivated' (ibid.:2). Furthermore, this destructive vision of the self, centring on the unstable 'see-saw of esteem', works to occlude and exclude the many alternative ways of being in the world, which are possible but sidelined by its imperialising market impulse. The abstract voluntaristic invocation to be a choosing consuming self, which connects so powerfully with the discourse of self-esteem, thus leaves in its wake the emotional costs of shame, exclusion and bullying. This is the individualised emotional pathology, which results from the impossibly contradictory way the neo-liberal 'vision' of the consuming self, organises our feelings.

## **7. Conclusion**

Dilemmas of the self in commodity culture?

## **Part One: The extraordinary in ordinary consumption**

### **1. 1 Consuming brands - minus the 'gloss'**

In **Chapter One**, I made some strong objections to the approach to consumption informed by, what I argued was, an insufficiently critical engagement with post-Fordism. This, compounded by a reading of Foucault, which placed too much emphasis on 'technologies of the self', whilst downplaying his work on subjectification, led to a voluntaristic approach to consumption and agency, in much, though not all, contemporary Culturalist work. I suggested the work of Mort (1996), Nixon (1996), Fiske (1987) and others overplayed the possibilities for the expression of new subjectivities and for the enactment of new identities, through consumption. As McRobbie argued, 'New Timers', such as Mort, tended to put too much of a 'gloss' (1997:37) on consumption, overlooking the everyday social realities and reproductive pressures of gender and class. Edwards (2000) argued further, that too much time has been spent researching elite consumers, and their creative practices, whilst ignoring those outside the ranks of the style 'cognoscenti'.

Agreeing with these criticisms this research, by contrast, turned to look at how and why ordinary young people from mainly working and lower middle class backgrounds, consume brands. The results revealed a rich texture of interaction with, and use of, branded goods which challenges overly voluntaristic perspectives on, and analysis of, consumption. The results do show the central role consuming branded goods can play in young peoples' subjectivities, and in shaping how they understand both their own, and other people's identities. However, what is also intriguing is how much what they tell us departs from the picture of the increasingly footloose disembodied agent of much social theory. Instead, the focus group discussions reveal the persistence of the social and the importance of the terrain of social class, in particular, amongst today's supposedly all too cool and savvy teenagers. They also reveal the complexities and contradictions of that social landscape, in a time of change brought about by neo-liberal individualisation and globalisation. In this conclusion, I will reiterate the arguments I have made about the enduring dialectical relationship of the individual and the social, and revisit and elaborate on the classed, gendered and racialised dimensions of consuming brands.

Reviewing my conclusions, I will also outline what the implications of my work are for future research into consumption, identity and subjectivity. Drawing on this analysis, my focus addresses young people's consumption of brands as a series of dilemmas between, what Giddens, more broadly, described as, 'a commodified versus personalised experience of the self' (1991). To conclude, I will give a final consideration of the embodied and the reflexive, cognitive and ideological dimensions of consuming brands, as well as its emotional economy, in relation to the contemporary politics of consumption.

## **1.2 The global in the local and the social in the individual**

David Harvey (2000) shrewdly argues, there is a pronounced tendency to counterpose either, what he calls, 'the most macro of all discourses, globalisation' with 'surely the most micro from the standpoint of understandings of society' - the body - in much social and cultural theory (2000:13). Harvey's recognition of these two scales of analysis as contemporary 'conceptual dominants' (ibid.) is, I think, crucial. For Harvey, the difficulty is that these two 'scalar' have been all too frequently and conveniently separated. He argues, 'little or no systematic attempt has been made to integrate 'body talk' with 'globalisation talk' (ibid.). More specifically then, his desire to link these 'opposites' is apposite for the following reasons. As we saw above, global brands such as Nike can be made to act as embodied signs of local belonging. This was especially so, for the young men and women in the focus groups who were recent migrants to Britain, *cf* 5(2.2). Furthermore, as I argued above, global brands more generally are key elements in how young men and women come to embody their social conditions.

Thus Charlesworth (2000), drawing on Merleau Ponty (1962, 1964) and Heidegger (1962), highlights how the social comes to be in the individual. In particular he shows how, what Wittgenstein described as, 'inherited background' (1972:15), comes to be taken in and embodied in class dispositions or 'habitus', as particular ways of being in the world (Bourdieu 1986:170), *cf* 2(1.5). This approach, I have argued, foregrounds a particularly important 'pre-cognitive' dimension to consuming brands. It suggests that not all of what these young people do when they consume, and how they are in the world more generally, is the product of abstract, rational deliberation and choice, as conservative political economy, *cf* 1(1.1 to 1.5) and some 'hyper rational' (Walkerdine

et al 2001:24) social theory suggests. I will return to the wider significance of this point, when I discuss the contemporary politics of consumption, later on.

Branded goods and their logos, can then, say a lot about those who consume them. With this in mind, in 1(1.4), Douglas and Isherwood (1979) challenged us to think about goods 'less for what they can "do" for us, and more for what they "say"' (Lee 2000:56-70). This research shows both the prescience of their challenge, and its limitations. At times, as we saw in **Chapters Four, Five and Six**, brands can work as extraordinarily sensitive markers of social position (Lury: 1996). They can be made to act as powerful signifiers of specific sub-cultural identities, groups and social affiliations. The young women in group **2.HW**, for example, commented on the role of 'little bags' in cohering friendship groups. This very much fitted in with the arguments made by Leiss, Klein and Jhalley who note, the 'totemic role of product images', which become emblems for collectivities' (1997:344).

With regard to the limitations of Douglas and Isherwood's approach, as we have seen, there is, I would argue, no simple dividing line between what goods can "do" and "say". Rather, the embodied nature of our relationship to clothing, for example, means branded goods as material commodities simultaneously do and say things for us. Indeed, what they do and say, are intimately linked in a dialectic between the meaning assigned to brands, and the lived corporeal social experience they can instantiate, *cf* 6(3.1 to 3.5). Wearing the right brand produced physically embodied feelings of social safety, security and comfort for many of the young people who took part in this study. This contributed to, what I termed, the 'practical appreciative' disposition towards brands *cf* 5(2.2). It is a mistake, therefore, to separate out the symbolic from the material, and embodied, in the manner of the orthodoxy of 'dematerialisation' (Slater 1997). Thus the symbolic exchange values of Goldman and Papson's 'commodity sign' (1998:24-25) merged with, and could not be separated from, the more directly physical use values of branded goods, *cf* 1(1.2), exemplified in the feeling of being 'at home' with Nike, *cf* 5(2.2.1). In the case of recent immigrants from the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the South Asian Diaspora, local style takes the form of the globally ubiquitous sports brands: Nike, Reebok or Nickelson. Morley writes of 'the mediated nation as symbolic home' (2000:105), here we have the mediated global brand acting as a symbol of the local, neighbourhood home. Thus, returning to Harvey (*op. cit.*), the

taking in and embodiment of the 'social background' is marked by a global to local dynamic, and vice versa.

### **1.3 Individualisation or dilemmas of the self and social?**

On a more general level, this need for security and comfort, translates into a strong desire for social belonging, and a widely experienced appreciation of the role branded clothing, footwear and accessories may play in achieving this. That the need for social identification remains strong testifies, I would argue, to the limits of theories of 'individualisation' (Beck 1992, 2000). Those, who suggest that we all can some how become the autonomous authors of our own destiny, mistakenly sidestep the fundamental point made by Mead (1934) and Cooley ([1902] 1922). For Mead, the self could only be understood as an entity which could take in the other. Therefore to become a self, a 'me' in his terms (a socialised self made up of the internalised attitudes of others), instead of just an 'I', (an unsocialised collection of desires needs and wants), involved the individual human agent in a process of ceaseless reflexivity, between self and other. As Elliot puts it, 'surveying of the territory of the self is always carried out with reference to the reaction of others' (Elliot 2001:26). Unlike Beck, and even Sennett (1998), who is a powerful critic of the corrosive effects of neo-liberalisation, I think the social and the need for social relationships and bonds remains strong.

For these late teenagers, their concern with surveying themselves, and others, is always carried out through an intensely and contradictory social optic. Their emotional desire to be socially accepted and 'esteemed', *cf* **Chapter Six**, indexes just how much the boundaries between ourselves and others 'blur' (Wetherell and Maybin 1996:253). It also demonstrates how much time is spent negotiating the sense of the self, through the social. In Simmel's (1904) terms, therefore, the dialectics of consuming brands remain weighted towards the social, and to being 'apart of' rather than 'apart from' other people. Thus the pull of the social persists despite the intensity of the address which is made to young people as individualised consuming 'selves', or 'entrepreneurs of the self' (Rose 1998). Alongside the neoliberal invocation of the self, and the 'self-self' axis Blackman (2004:225) describes, a strongly experienced desire for the social remains, albeit as part of a wider subjectively experienced dilemma of the self in an increasingly commodified culture.

The stress on individual self-agency, through consumption, and on individualisation more generally, is expressed strongly in advertising, from Nike's 'just do it' campaign, to Reebok's, 'I Am What I Am' (IAWIA) promotion. Consequently, the desire to fit in socially and to be included in groups, expressed across this study, *cf* 4(5.1 to 5.3), is set against this contradictory invocation to self realize, by being your own reflexive transformative agent, *cf* (McRobbie in du Gay and Pryke 2002), as the 'IAWIA' campaign proposes. Accordingly, Mike Skinner, on behalf of 'IAWIA'<sup>139</sup>, explains, 'I never quite fitted in with any scene. It's better to **be yourself** than a poor version of someone else.' This stress on what the individual must do, in order to transcend the barriers and clear the obstacles from the path to self-fulfillment, presents young people with a dilemma given their *social* experience of the *self*, consumption and of life more generally. As we saw in 6(2 and 3) it is only through being involved socially in a scene, by interacting, being included and recognized as a member of a group, that they get the social 'feedback' which allows them, to feel 'praised' and 'esteemed' emotionally.

#### **1.4 Being in the middle, choice and bullying**

One way they attempt to resolve the tension between the individual and the social is to identify being alright, okay and safe, and being 'acceptable', with being in the 'middle' (*cf* Walkerdine 2000: 46), and occupying the space of the middle ground socially. But the social cannot be separated from social class, as Walkerdine puts it, 'being in the middle – not rich, not poor, not Other or extreme – feels like a safe place to be compared to the terrors of other possible positions' (*ibid.*). Thus the power of regulatory 'norms', and their exclusionary dynamics mean, the sense of 'normality' and approval they desire, comes thoroughly shaped by their perceptions, and subjective experience, of the social relations of class, as well as those of gender and 'race'. With regard to class, 'normality' is permeated with a consciousness of where you are located in society, and your position in relation to the hierarchy of social domination and subordination. Skeggs argues, to understand what people might want to identify with, we need to know what it is they want to dis-identify or distance themselves from (1997).

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<sup>139</sup> Holmes and Skinner appear on the Reebok 'IAWIA' web site see footnote six, for web address.

With regard to these processes of identification and dis-identification, 'social distancing' or 'discursive aversion', *cf* 4(2.2), Blackman, suggests to be normal is to be 'middle class', but to be working class risks pathologisation for being a member of the 'dangerous classes' (2001:30). More specifically then, for the young people in this study, their anxiety and 'psychic stress' (Walkerdine et al 2001) about class is perceptually organised around, and explicitly translated into class positions plotted in relation to an overarching axis of the 'rough and respectable' socially *cf* 4(3.1). This opposition dissects both the working class itself as *rough versus respectable*, as well as the working class from the middle class, *cf* 4(3.3). This class axis is the key precept which organises both their judgements of taste - shaping their own choice of branded goods - and the judgements they make about the choice and taste, displayed by others.

Their discussions indicate how anxiety about class pervades their thinking in relation to their consumption and sense of identity, both for the self, and other. Thus the 'discursive', 'classificatory' and 'scopic processes' of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1986:511), which I identified as, 'objectifying', 'fixing' and 'distancing socially', *cf* 4 (2.1 to 2.3 and 3.1 to 3.6), act to fix class position and social worth through the adjudication of taste. In their discussions a class inflected lexicon emerged, which indexed the burden of fear, they carried, of being socially humiliated if they were judged to be 'cheap', 'poor', 'tramp' or 'trailer trash', on the basis of their 'choice' of brands. As I argued above, *cf* 4(1.1 to 1.2), 'choice', itself is very much an undertheorised concept. *Consuming Brands* shows how the burden of risk between social success and failure, as Harré noted (1979), is so unequally borne in class and gender terms *cf* 6(2.1 to 2.2). Because of this, consumer 'choice' should not be understood as the autonomous action of individuals, as neo-liberal and conservative political economy would have it. Rather choice is social, it is shaped by access to material resources as well as by 'discursive', 'classificatory' and 'scopic' processes. Moreover, in capitalist society, it is one of *the* expressions of social power, and it is indivisible from the 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977), which operates to regulate taste, *cf* 4(1.2 and 6.1).

Clearly these young peoples' subjective outlook on the world is fearful of the ramifications of living in a hierarchical class society, and of the stigma associated with being judged as 'rough.' Moreover they are anxious about the widely reported

'bullying', cf 4(5.1 to 5.4), meted out to those deemed 'poor' or 'cheap', cf 4(2.1 to 3.6) and 6(2.2.1 to 2.2.5). As I argued above, intimidation and bullying was the single most common topic of discussion. Though not caused by brands, and branding per se, bullying cannot be detached from the everyday rhetoric of symbolic violence which is part and parcel of 'learning to consume.' This includes the tendency to conflate the value of people with the value of their things, in the manner encouraged by marketing discourse more generally, cf 4(5.1 to 5.6). Interestingly, despite the evidence which suggests bullying is rife in schools, and a blight on young people lives<sup>140</sup>, 'compulsory individuality' and the 'consuming self', as the dominant 'visions' of personhood (Despret 2004:29), remain marginal to political and media debate about bullying, but central to current governmental discourse about choice.

### **1.5 Consuming Brands – analysing the neo-liberal culture of consumption**

The implications for future research, which arise from the social dynamics of this emotional economy of consumption are, I think, far reaching. As I suggested in **Chapter One**, far too many studies of consumption, especially those which have drawn on the post-Fordist thesis, have assumed too neat a fit between increased self expression and the increased availability of consumer goods. Such rationalistic, voluntaristic and individualistic assumptions inform the work of Mort (1996) and Nixon (1996) and, I would contend, these assumptions are still felt in much work within Cultural and Media Studies and the social sciences more generally. Too often the suggestion is that there is a discrete and authentic 'individual' self to be realised, and that consumer 'choice' and practices or 'technologies of the self', cf 2(1.1 to 1.5), can simply deliver it.

*Consuming Brands* suggests a different picture, and calls for a different kind of research. Beyond these assumptions, it points to the impossible emotional strain this individualised project of the self, and self agency, presents for the young people in this study. Despite their creativity and emotional and critical resilience, my research shows how the burden of choice, and the 'opportunity' to choose to be your self, remains

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<sup>140</sup> Thus, the government's youth 'Czar' Professor Al Aynsley-Green, reports, 'every child I have met has been affected by, with virtually no exceptions, bullying. cf <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4433460.stm> and cf <http://education.guardian.co.uk/pupilbehaviour/story/0,16806,1642225,00.html>. Accessed Monday 19<sup>th</sup> December 2005 at 19.00.

shaped by a set of embodied, emotionally experienced, and discursively designated classed, gendered and racialised social positions. Research in Cultural Studies, in particular, needs to interrogate these underlying individualist and rationalist assumptions, which stress the potential for individual empowerment, transformation and self agency through consumption. *Consuming Brands* has begun to address why so many young people invest so much emotionally in what they consume, and what the subjective and social consequences of this are. Future research, in this field, needs to further interrogate the unequal burden of psychic and social risk (Harré 1979) which being a 'choosing', 'consuming self' carries. Moreover, the focus of such research, as I have emphasised in the design of this project, should not necessarily be on those whose experience appears exceptional. It is the apparently ordinary, the everyday and the 'average' person that my research has productively focused on, and I think Cultural Studies needs to focus on much more. It needs to do this, if it is to realise the full implications of William's statement that culture is 'ordinary' (1989:4).

If we are, to complete the job of reinstating the people, that **Chapter Three** argued for, then more work needs to place the terrain of the 'hyphen' in the psycho-social at its core, cf (Hollway 2005). In breaking open the 'black box' of the emotional economy of consumption with all its needs and wants; anxieties and desires and hopes and fears, I have begun to explore this specific dimension of the terrain of the psycho-social. However, we need to continue this work by asking one overarching question, across a range of concrete social contexts. What has happened to make the 'see saw' emotional economy of consumption, I have outlined above, such a key means of self-expression? To do this *Consuming Brands* argues, we need to focus research on 'how we learn' to consume. My research, demonstrates the intensely contradictory nature of consumption in neo-liberal capitalism. But, Culturalist approaches have failed to comment on, and sufficiently analyse, 'choice' and the way in which neo-liberal consumerism seeks to both valorise the self, and simultaneously hold it up to a pernicious regime of social inspection of taste and 'choice', as a part of the search for evidence of the competence, validity and authenticity of the individual self-agent. There is a need, therefore, to take up more directly critical, and political, research questions which examine the 'doxic' (Bourdieu 1986:471) ideological quality of consumption under neo-liberalism. We need

to investigate further its psycho-social dimensions and how, and why, it comes to be seen as 'just a way of life', *cf* 4 (5.3).

With regard to the phenomena of bullying, future research could examine the psycho-social regulation of taste, choice and competence in specific institutional contexts, such as schools and the role branded consumption may play in this. This work could address specific phenomena, such as the relationship between competence in consumption and imputed social value, within the 'norm' of the uniform system, and the ubiquitous 'non-uniform' days. Future studies could examine the relationship between bullying and the invocation on children and young people, to 'choose' not to be seen as 'trashy', 'skanky' or 'poor'. This would be particularly important work, given both the vocabulary of class stigma attached to particular brands, and the government's policy of publicly labelling, and visibly identifying, those who are judged to be members of the 'dangerous classes' Blackman (2004). Thus, I would contend, the battery of ASBO's and the government's support for bans on hooded tops in shopping malls, and other pseudo-public spaces, and the more general 'symbolic violence' against young working class people which underlies this, should be central issues for an engaged and critically political Cultural Studies. These phenomena are just as important, and just as much a part of the subjective social fabric of today's 'cultures of consumption' (Mort 1996), as ethnographic studies of those who are the movers and shakers in the cultural industries. More widely, there is a need to research the consequences of the general commodification and consumerisation of education. There is a need to examine the discourse of choice and competence as a changed 'order of discourse', *cf* 3(4.3), in education. We need to address how both individual learners and individual schools/colleges come to be labelled as 'successes' or 'failures' - who in both cases can then become the objects of regulation through intervention and coercion.

## **Part Two: Out of the dichotomy and into the contradictions**

### **2.1 The passive/active dichotomy or contradictory dispositions?**

But it is also important to recognize, the contradictory nature of both young people's thinking about, and their embodied experience of, consumption taste and identity, as framed through the axis of social position. Rather than the dominant and, I would argue, schematically cognitive and reductive characterisation of ordinary, and most often working class people as 'active' or 'passive' consumers, a very different picture emerges from my research. As Billig suggests, common sense consciousness is profoundly contradictory. It is made up of 'a kaleidoscope of opinions' (1988:21-24) which reflect the contrary ideologies in public circulation. Such contradictory discourses mean that we tend to live our social lives through a series of 'ideological dilemmas' (ibid.). The results in **Chapter Five** demonstrate the prescience of Billig's arguments. A range of six, patterned, but often contradictory, partially discursive, dispositions emerged in discussion, from the 'submissive' to the 'radical critical'. Thus these young men and women, whilst using denigrating socially abusive terms such as, 'Townies', 'Essex boys and girls', 'Carrot crunchers' *cf* 4(3.6) and 'trailer trash' and 'tramps', *cf* 5(2.4 to 2.5), also expressed sympathy and empathy towards those they directed these terms at.

In **Chapters Four and Five**, groups of young women from more middle class backgrounds showed how, they could be critical of the class based social order, at the same time as they appeared to endorse it. They both used the pejorative terminology of class stereotypes, and participated in casual forms of symbolic violence in their talk, whilst also expressing critical contrary opinions about these designations, *cf* 4(3.4 to 3.5). Additionally, though the big brands such as 'Nike' were, at times, evaluated positively, and worn for the feelings of social safety they gave, as **Chapter Five** showed, there was also criticism of the role branded consumption plays in the class order of society. However, these 'practical critical', 'ironic' and 'radical critical' dispositions towards brands frequently collided, or existed in uneasy tension, with the 'practical appreciative' disposition. The big corporations, such as 'Nike', were attacked for sustaining the injustices of global capitalism. But, once again, these attacks were framed dilemmatically as they drew on the participants' contradictory experiences of branded goods and their understanding of ideology as lived, *cf* 5(2.6.1 to 2.6.4).

## **2.2 Consuming Brands - Patterns of contradictory dispositions**

*Consuming Brands* therefore moves beyond the reductive categories of consumption and the characterisation of consumers as 'passive' or 'active'. Against this terminology, which reduces the contradictory experiences of consumption, I have proposed an alternative range of subtle but patterned dispositions, cf 5(2.1 to 2.6). In place of a bifurcation which itself, I would argue, tends to reproduce the very 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977), I have argued is a key product of the classed, gendered and racialised adjudication of taste, this mapping of dispositions breaks apart the older model. It begins to reveal what's 'active' in the supposedly 'passive' and what's 'passive' in the supposedly 'active'. It also challenges Mort, Nixon's and others focus on a social strata of 'style cognoscenti' (1996), and the broader valorisation of elite and indeed sub-cultural consumers within Cultural Studies. As I suggest, in **Chapters Five and Six**, this misses out on, the rich complexity of contrary motivations, actions, thoughts and emotions which inform those who just seem to fade or 'blend' into the crowd.

In addition to examining the complex terrain of learning to consume using a completely different subjectively and conceptually grounded tool kit, *Consuming Brands*, also points to the need to address cultural practices such as consumption in a holistic and dialectical manner which I contend is absent from much existing study. *Consuming Brands* suggests Cultural Studies needs to address consumption and consumer beyond its familiar remit. Whilst assessing the potential consumption offers, for discrete 'individual' self-agency and self-expression, has merit, a much more circumspect approach is needed. As well as challenging methodological individualism, abstract rationalism and the implicit economism of approaches which have drawn on post-Fordist theory in particular, *Consuming Brands* suggests a new set of questions need to make it on to the research agenda.

We need to address in overarching terms how people negotiate the contradictions of consumption. In particular, we need to further address how they deal with their reflexive knowledge of the range of issues, cf 5(5.3), associated with their choice of branded goods in relation to the wider politics of branding more generally. Future research could also address how their subjective knowledge of the negative assumptions that will be made about their 'choices' is dealt with psycho-socially, given

the fact that they may have no choice but to choose things they know will attract the kind of social aversion, I have detailed. Here I am thinking specifically of a range of further questions pertaining to the experience and psycho-social stresses of 'shopping at Pacific', described by some of the young black and Asian women from Walthamstow, in their accounts of 'pecuniary indecency' and 'clandestine bricolage', cf 5(2.4.2).

Lury argues, that the brand, is a mobile framing device, which 'retains margins of indeterminacy' and 'that consumers can extend those margins' (2004: 162). This is an important argument, because it affirms the degree of openness and complexity which emerged in the six dispositions, towards brands, I have mapped out above. Lury, also makes it clear that, despite its ontological status as a complex object and an 'organised interactivity' (ibid.), the brand is 'more often closed than open.' She argues further that the, 'qualitative differentiation of the brand is ultimately constrained by the pursuit of profit.' All too often this makes the brand, 'complicatedly predictable rather than truly interactive' (ibid.: 162- 163.) This approach to the brand, which recognises 'it may be totalising' but it is 'never a total fact' (op. cit.), suggests much about its ability to put the qualitative into the quantitative in the global economy and to 'satisfy wants of the stomach or the fancy,' as Marx put it earlier. However, despite the eloquence and subtlety of Lury's approach, and, its undoubted acuity in analysing brands as multidimensional objects, which 'enable complex human sociality' (op. cit.: 161), I think her analysis tends to abstract, the 'performativity of the brand' (ibid.: 8) from the kind of subjective social dilemmas and psychic stress, described in *Consuming Brands*.

Taking the example above, the young women who use 'clandestine bricolage' to negotiate 'pecuniary indecency', have to do this from within an emotional economy of consumption, and in the context of a regime of 'symbolic violence' applied to taste, with all its classed, gendered and racialised dimensions, which threatens to turn their 'choice' of brands, into signs of social stigma. Whilst, Lury recognises the communicative work of the brand as an interface, the difficulty is, as this research has shown, no matter how much brands can be used as an interface to 'organise communication' (ibid.:7), the neo-liberal 'vision' of the consuming self they contribute to, produces an individualised emotional pathology, which remains mostly overlooked.

## **Part Three: The consuming self: class, race and gender revisited**

### **3.1 Trajectories of the self or the boomerang of the social?**

Given the class infused, discursive and perceptual terrain which surrounds their experience of branded consumption, Bourdieu's argument, 'taste classifies and it classifies the classifier' (1986:6) continues to hold. By contrast, the idea that we are entering into a society where the social structure and strictures of class are loosening their hold, in favour of new 'social biographies' (Beck 1991:93), trajectories of self-transformation (Leadbeater 1999), and self-invention (Giddens 1991), emerges as an inadequate and disembodied abstraction. For Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 'class has not been rendered an unworkable category' (2001: 21). Rather they argue that more attention needs to be paid to its lived, subjective dimensions and dynamics. Within this realm, they argue, there is a need to critically assess the role of the classificatory discourses of class, these results have evidenced, as well as the embodied dispositional elements of how class is lived. 'Classification operates in and through subjects: it is marked on bodies and minds, it ruptures the smooth surface of the discourses of classlessness, it can be spotted a mile off' (Walkerdine et al op. cit.). *Consuming Brands* shows how class is so painfully 'spotted a mile off', through taste and embodied disposition. It shows how class and its boundaries, are regulated through an intense, sometimes subtle and sometimes crude form of symbolic violence, which ranges from the euphemistic to the abusive, as Charlesworth noted (2000:168), cf 4(3.3).

Though Beck (1991, 1998) and Giddens (1991) argue personal transformative and individual self-agency is reconstituting the fabric of the social, class position - operating through distinction in taste - as a key part of the wider power relations of class, keeps on boomeranging back into the picture. Thus, we saw S, a sixteen year old white working class girl from Walthamstow<sup>141</sup> knocked down by the returning boomerang of social class, as she attempted to fashion a respectable style for herself. Humiliated, and made to bear an unequal burden of psychic stress with regard to 'choice', she felt guilty, inadequate and embarrassed, by her lack of cultural capital and economic resources, cf 4(5.5).

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<sup>141</sup> S of [8.WW.8/9].

As Skeggs argued, the 'self', as with all concepts, is not a neutral but a classed term that produces 'difference through its utterance' (2004:134). In addition, she asserts, 'the constant denial of the class-resourced based nature of the self... is a modern day form of self-fetishism, hiding the conditions of its production' (ibid.: 134). Thus, the overriding social fact that emerges from *Consuming Brands*, is that the self, as presented in 'IAWIA' and consumer discourse more widely, references a particular classed version of personhood, which is, 'produced to retain the interests of a privileged few, requiring for its construction the exclusion of others' (ibid.: 53). It is to the question of how that exclusion is structured that I want now to turn.

### **3.2 Class: The rough and respectable / the sedentary and the mobile - creating the working class other**

What is clear from these results is that despite the orthodoxies of theories of mobility, flexibility and self-reflexivity, there is 'a power geometry' which continues to shape the social landscape as Massey (1994) observes. It shapes who can travel physically and who can not, who is socially mobile and who isn't and it also governs who has the resources to consume and transform themselves. With regard to class, Skeggs argues, some must be fixed so that others can move (2004:154). That fixing, as we saw in **Chapter Four**, centred on classifications and stereotypes or 'semiotic condensations' which foregrounded, 'locatedness' and 'a geography of placement'. This rhetorical territorialisation of class, understood within the framework of Charlesworth's axis of representation (op. cit.), became a powerfully ideological 'way of speaking class indirectly' (Skeggs 2004:50) and of 'displacing' and so 'politically disarming' references to it.

However despite this discursive euphemisation, and no matter how intense the invocation is to 'compulsory individuality' and consumer driven self-agency, (Cronin 2000), the neo-liberal consuming self remains based on a valorisation of the self, which is class based. As well as this it is based on a fractured and contradictory vision of the self which produces a series of further dilemmas. As Cronin asserts, the self in the discourses of consumerism, such as Nike's 'just do it', is both an 'object' and a 'subject', a 'project' and an 'agent' (ibid.: 273), cf 6(1.2). This contradiction lies at the core of the paradox which was raised, and so keenly felt by S and J, two young women from Herts, cf 6(4). How can they both be authentic selves as *objects*, with depth, and,

fluid, mobile selves, as *subjects*, who, unencumbered by the weight of personality or character, and their embodied class and gender dispositions, are free to pursue their lives as a series of agentic transformative projects? It is, therefore, a specific kind of individual subject or agent who is cut out for this biographical work. As Cronin argues, 'the individual is an exclusive and politically privileged category', which excludes 'women' and the 'working classes,' (op. cit.:274). And as Skeggs (2004) maintains, it is the middle classes who are most resourced, enabled and entitled, to deal with this contradiction and its ramifications, 'a universalistic self is presented as if it is available for all, when in fact the access to the resources to make the the self is not equally available' (ibid.: 176).

This conundrum of the self is emblematic, of the wider series of social dilemma's which are prevalent in *Consuming Brands*. The dilemma of the self in a class and increasingly commodified culture, is a dilemma of the self as fixed and sedentary set against the self as mobile and transformative. I would contend, therefore, that the *rough respectable* class axis is homologous to, and superimposed on the *sedentary mobility* axis, noted by Morley (2000) and others, cf 4(3.6). Thus inertia and staying put, are socially fixed, rhetorically territorialised and ideologically adjudicated, through the kind of symbolic violence exercised in everyday talk about 'Townies' or 'Essex boys and girls' and, accepted and used by those who are the target of such invective themselves. These terms, as I argued earlier, fix and socially distance them and encourage the reading of their embodied classed and gendered dispositions as the key sign of their immobility, locatedness and thus of their *personal* failure. The personal nature of this failure, as we have seen, is read through and in part confirmed by, their rigorous, unstinting and so 'univorous' (Skeggs 2004:144) taste in brands.

Thus the Burberry hats, the Nike hoodies, the Nickelson jackets and jogging pants - worn de riguer - tucked into white socks etc, 'semiotically condense', in the classifying and objectifying gaze of others, the failings of the world back onto and into the individual working class boys and girls, who wear them. Their disposition then comes to be read as the most outward sign of their 'inner' failure as selves. By contrast being able to move is read as a key index of *personal* success. A key part of this is the display of 'omnivorousness' (Skeggs ibid.), of deftness and range in cultural competence, consumer choice and taste. This allows one to change and continually transform as

consumers, thus avoiding the branded clothing to which, for the 'univorous', the 'reverse loglo effect', cf 4(3.5), the stigmata of the rough, appends. That the social invective of class, and the wider processes of 'symbolic violence' in Britain, now turn on the *sedentary mobile* as well as the *rough respectable* axes is perhaps not surprising. Self-agency, choice and choosing across the board are now at a premium, given the global 'imposition of a neo-liberal orthodoxy' in mainstream political discourse (Callinicos 2003:3). As Bauman argues, 'the dimension along which those 'high up' and 'low down' are plotted in a society of consumers, is their degree of mobility their freedom to choose where to be' (1998: 86). Thus the fetishistic denial of the classed basis of the self, returns as an obsession with classed locations or places.

*Consuming Brands* therefore provides new knowledge and raises some key questions for policy makers across the fields of education, from learning support to teaching, and from educational psychology to the management of what is euphemistically termed 'social inclusion', in government circles. For how much longer will class be simultaneously evaded and fetishised, in the manner I have described? Moreover since, as *Consuming Brands* shows, class appears to be such a central dimension of their psycho-social experience, how can it be allowed to continue to silently inflict damage on young peoples' lives, as well as draining the energy and resources of those who work with them? More specifically, in relation to this, for how much longer will the invocation to 'freely' consume be allowed to rule unchallenged, when its contrary effects are written so large. With regard to this, 'the boomerang of the social' isn't just experienced by individuals like S, cf 4(5.5), it feeds back into the subjective quality of life in general.

The implications of my findings, that consumption, and competence in branded consumption in particular, is one of the key means through which young people attempt to secure and make up the embodied emotional states of 'self-respect' and 'self-esteem', are far reaching. It means the work of researching how the contradictions of 'consumption', and being addressed as a consumer, are subjectively lived in a deeply unequal society, and their impact on our psychic and physical health, cf Wilkinson (2005), assumes a new importance. Thus far, from a supposedly joined up government, we have seen a mixture of prescriptive moves dressed in the language of 'liberal' reforms. Thus a battery of what are in fact 'neo-liberal' sumptuary initiatives, have

been applied to consumption through a bewildering array of policy directives covering everything from school dinner menus, to obesity, smoking, gambling and 'binge' drinking, amongst others. Yet the question as to when, and how, these contradictory policy fragments will be joined up - through a critical review of their common ingredient - namely the role of consumption and, in particular, the effects of the interpellation of the consumer, as the hegemonic form of personhood, stands ominously ignored.

### **3.3 Race and class, and the racialised dynamics of consumption**

Turning to race, Walkerdine et al argue, all too often conventional approaches to the study of race and ethnicity focus on white black conflict in ways which, 'sideline or even ignore class and gender positioning' (2001:25). The assumption is made, they continue, that 'all black people are working class' and they have 'no interest in class identity' (ibid.). The discussions across the focus groups which contained black, Asian and other non-white participants show how, on the contrary, class is as much a source of interest, and anxiety for black and Asian people, as it is for white people.

In particular, in 5(4.2), we saw how social classificatory, discursive and scopic dimensions organized around the *rough respectable* axis of class anxiety, fed the concern not to be seen as 'cheap' or 'bait'. Shopping at 'Pacific Clothing', on the market, or buying discounted tops from shop windows like 'Pacific', produced what I called a fear of 'pecuniary indecency' which in turn fed tactics of 'clandestine bricolage', as a part of the 'practical creative' and 'critical ironic' dispositions towards brands. What seems clear, is not just how important the desire to be seen as culturally competent is to these young women, but also, I would argue, just how strong the class dimension to their consumption practices is. Yet, this has tended to be ignored, in favour of analysis which attributes young black people's style and competence to race or ethnicity. This was not the only example of the imbrication of their consumption by a concern with social standing and status. In 5(2.5.2), we saw a concern to be seen as respectable or decent in class terms, framing discussions of, and judgments about, excessive consumption. In particular, using Billig's distinction between 'the implicit and explicit aspects of ideological dilemmas' (1988: 21), I suggested that the same kind of 'social distancing' around class, described by Skeggs (2004) and Probyn (2000), operated.

Beck, argues, 'class is losing its sub-cultural basis and is no longer experienced' (Beck 1992:98 in Skeggs op. cit.: 53). These examples suggest that on the contrary, class experience still matters and not only to white people. *Consuming Brands* shows how the subjective experience of class, and of life in a hierarchically structured society, produces a constant corrosive anxiety about status, respectability, respect and the lack of these, as Wilkinson argues (2005). Thus the desire to be seen as 'up to the standard' by wearing 'decent' brands is one of the strongest discursive threads across the groups. It indexes the 'psychic costs' of class experience, for black, Asian and other groups as well as for white people. In group, [9.WWMX]<sup>142</sup>, we saw how the *rough respectable* axis, which both dissected the working class and separated it from the middle class, already inflected so powerfully by ideologies of gender *cf* 4(3.1 to 3.2), was further inflected by race. Thus, the dilemma that is posed for young black and Asian working class men, in relation to their consumption of brands, between being seen as 'thugged out' or 'stacked', *cf* 5(2.4). What is of most interest here is how their subjective view, crystallises the paucity of choice and the narrowness of 'vision' (Despret op. cit.) which the 'consuming self' presents. Just like the young white men, the 'Townies', who were the object of symbolic violence targeted at their branded dress and disposition *cf* 4(2.4), these young black men's choice of dress, driven by a similar desire for social standing and respect is, as I argued earlier, turned even more forcefully into a 'negative set of distinctions' (Charlesworth 2000:157).

It is important to stress that, despite the commonalities of class experience, the experience of being seen as 'thugged out' or 'stacked', clearly differs from that of working class white boys, because of the racism directed against them, in this instance by the Police. However, it is also important to recognise the interface between elements of class and race discourse, both in terms of the classed dimensions of the experience of consumption for young black and Asian people, highlighted above, and the racialised dynamics of consumption experienced by some young working class people. For Skeggs, 'the mechanism of trying to fix others is well known in racist discourse e.g. where do you come from? is a question frequently asked of British subjects' (2004:50). What is important, I think, is how, and why, this and other elements of a racialising

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<sup>142</sup> Four girls C 16 (C2 E); C 15 (E); L 16 (D C1); Ch 15 (E C2) all black and three boys Sad 16 (E D) Asian and S 16 (D E) and D 16(E E) both black. One girl decided to leave early.

discourse are now being applied in class terms. Given the territorial rhetorical displacement of class to place, it is significant that these elements, including the focus on where you come from and what you look like, and the negative assumptions that follow, have been co-opted from the ideological repertoires of racism. Charlesworth argues, 'racialising comments' are being made 'about people so highly visible because of their demeanour and yet who are also completely lacking in the resources to represent themselves' (2000:4).

Aside from the pessimistic take on the possibility of challenging this 'racialising' discourse, I think Charlesworth is right. With regard to my study, there can be little doubt that the visible presence on the streets, (where else is there for them to go?), of groups of young people who are pejoratively designated as 'white trash', 'Townies', 'Rude boys', 'Essex girls', 'Chavs' or 'gangs in hoodies' etc, is a product of racialised processes of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977). Classified according to the *rough respectable* axis of class, such 'symbolic violence' acts to fix, essentialise and degrade many young working class men and women. That this is done on the basis of the smallest details of their appearance, and disposition, echoes the base absurdities of racism. Such racialisation occurs here via the adjudication of taste, and as part of an ideological reading, or 'misrecognition', of their wider 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1986), including dress and choice of brands, cf 4(2.1 to 2.3 and 3.3 to 3.4). The degree of social distancing and downright hostility to 'Burberry', the constant reiteration of 'ugh' when 'Burberry' or 'Hi-Tec' are mentioned, and the deep 'aversion' shown to those whose dress is judged 'cheap', 'fake' or 'tacky', clearly references the power of class distinction through taste, and its ability to turn culture into nature, in Bourdieu's terms.

Given the widespread occurrence of such a racialising discourse across the groups, including its use by the very people to whom it can do the most damage cf 4(3.5), such symbolic violence also underlines what Wilkinson (2004) describes as the 'intensification of status competition' in inegalitarian societies like Britain where, 'more people are deprived of status' (2004: 6)<sup>143</sup>. It also partly recalls what Michael Ignatieff (1994), following Freud (1930), calls 'the narcissism of minor differences' (Ignatieff quoted in Morley 2000: 221). Morley explains, this means, 'the smaller the

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<sup>143</sup> Cf [http://www.sdhi.ac.uk/Past\\_Events/wilkinsonpaper.htm](http://www.sdhi.ac.uk/Past_Events/wilkinsonpaper.htm)

actual differences between groups, the larger they are likely to loom in the imagination' (Morley *ibid.*). But it is the very experience of class society which produces the 'difference' in the dispositions of the 'Townies', which is embodied in their dress, manners and style, (including those small differences which provoke such aversion and hostility). Yet it is these very dispositions which are read so negatively as signs of a deeper inherent and essential inadequacy. As Charlesworth argues, there is a 'deep social Apartheid' of class in Britain. This 'marks the flesh of individuals' and it begets the kind of racialising discourse of inferiority and superiority, around taste and consumption, we have seen above (*op. cit.*: 15). I will return to this shortly.

### **3.4 The racialised dynamics of consumption and the politics of race and class**

*Consuming Brands* therefore shows how an intensely racialised ideological discourse is being applied to groups of young white men and women. I would argue, moreover, that if these young people are left to suffer this euphemised class 'symbolic violence', they may prove easy pickings for those who want to channel their unarticulated class resentment into the energy with which to fight the race war. Equally with regard to the class experience of young black and Asian men and women, if this remains something which is ignored in academic analysis, then the possibilities for addressing, and moving the scandal of the 'deep social Apartheid' of class (Charlesworth *op. cit.*), up the political and policy agenda can only be diminished. The interface of class position, and the assumptions that are made about this based on consumption, and of designations of race, as it is subjectively experienced, emerges here as both a threat and an opportunity politically.

The absurdities of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977) and the classifying eye potentially draw attention to the processes by which those with the most cultural and economic capital seek to marginalise those with the least. However there is nothing in the class experience of race, and racialised experience of class which will necessarily bring black, white, Asian and others together. However, I would argue a culturally informed politics of united action for social justice, to achieve mutual social respect and end to the depredations of class inequality, is potentially, well placed, to challenge the barbarism of racism too. To achieve this, however, what is required is collective social, not individual self-agency.

*Consuming Brands* by focusing on the subjective dimensions of being a consumer has, I'd contend, opened up a rich seam of meanings and thoughts, feelings and emotions and embodied dispositions, towards consumption. These reveal the emotional, embodied and reflexive terrain of the psycho-social to be the point at which we can neither talk of the individual or society, as wholly separate entities. Rather, as Critical Psychology rightly insists, these two entities can be separated only for analytical or heuristic purposes. As I argued, in the introduction, understanding how young people consume and are addressed as consumers, was vital because it marks the subjective spot where the tectonic plates of macro economic strategy and management meet with the micro demands and desires of the self. I would, strongly, contend that this approach to research has proved its worth. The terrain marked out in these results chapters and in this conclusion is the telling terrain of the psycho-social. It is one which is deeply marked by the subjective experience of a class society which, increasingly it seems, relies on an expansion of its racialised ideological discourses, to maintain class distinction. Such discourses are now central to the attempt to essentialise young white, as well as black working class men and women as 'others'. This ideological endeavour is made on the back of judgments about their sumptuary taste and disposition, organised through the homologies of the rough/ respectable and the sedentary/ mobile axes of social worth. I would hope, therefore, that that this work can become a resource for those concerned with developing politics and policy which challenges this vituperate process of social othering.

### **3.5 Gender detraditionalisation: between 'skanky' and 'stuck up'?**

If we turn to consider gender, as I suggested in **Chapter Four**, the term 'skank' crystallised how the ideological discourses of class and gender met. As we saw in 4.(3.1 to 3.2), 'skank', 'skanky birds' and other synonyms for 'rough' women, indexed both pejorative judgements of social worth, based on low social status or class position, and, inferences about gender status, framed sexually. Thus, 'skank' signified sexual looseness, easy availability and so, and in conventional patriarchal terms therefore, 'promiscuity.' As one young man put it, 'skanky birds' are those that 'put you in mortal [danger]' because they are 'scrubberish' cf 4(3.1).

The use of the word 'skank', and others like it, by both young men and women raised important questions for this research project. A number of theorists, including Mike Featherstone, argue that a transformation or a 'detraditionalisation' of conventional gender roles has taken place (Featherstone 1990). Whilst recognising the ideological regulation of gender and sexuality continues, McRobbie (1999) believes, changes in magazine culture have created the possibility of new, more open, discursive spaces, in which gender can be discussed. She contends that for young women, magazines like *More* can facilitate the 'room to move' (1999:53), and a space in which to explore sexuality and difference, beyond the usual commercially sanctioned patriarchal norms. Expressing some doubts about the possibility of any seamless rolling out of 'gender detraditionalisation', and in particular about what McRobbie calls, 'the unfixing of femininity' (op. cit.), Blackman (2004:223), discussing 'post-feminist woman' insists, 'there is no easy or straightforward inhabiting of any new cultural categories.' The struggle faced by the young women in *Consuming Brands* to not be seen as 'cheap' or 'skanky', certainly evidences the great difficulty they face in moving beyond, traditional discourses. When it comes to versions of 'femininity', they face a paucity of options, still shaped by familiar dichotomies including that of the 'madonna/whore' (op.cit. 227).

Blackman outlines the characteristic 'self-self' rather than 'self-other' (ibid.: 225) relationship which characterizes 'detraditionalised' woman, as a 'self made woman' who 'stands alone', and advises herself, rather than waiting for her man. She points to the dilemma faced by 'the post feminist woman' (ibid.) in terms of the competing injunctions to be both an autonomous agent whilst, 'desiring to be in a relationship with an intimate other' (op. cit.: 230). This bifurcation echoes the dilemma between the injunction to 'the self' to transform, and the need for the 'social' and social relationships, as the key source of practices of 'self-esteem', cf 6(2.1), which, I contend, characterises young people's experience of consumption. It also adds yet another complicating dimension to the dilemmas face by young women, and a further degree of stress to their psychic experience. What is clear is how limited and contradictory, the range of possible subject positions remains, and how their experience of the gendered self, remains shaped, as Skeggs (1997) argued, by class location.

### 3.6 Gender: masculinities and 'the homo-social gaze'?

Mort (1996) and Nixon (1996) argue that a similar set of changes in commercial culture, has opened up discursive spaces in which new forms of masculinity can be constructed and represented. They contend, men's and style magazines can encourage, new forms of 'male to male looking', or what Mort terms, a 'homosocial gaze', (1996:72). *Consuming Brands*, offers a chance to assess the extent to which these new masculine subjectivities and 'practices of looking', have become part of the fabric of everyday social life. Whilst there is plenty of evidence of the wider scopic dimensions of consuming brands, there is little evidence of any more generalized empathetic 'male to male looking' (Nixon 1996:178-195). This is hardly surprising given the imbrication of young men's discourse by the concerns about class, I have outlined. But it is these psycho-social dimensions of class which Mort and Nixon, unfortunately, overlook.

Rather than the development of a wider 'homo-social gaze' the young men in the focus groups explain, their experience of looking, and being looked at, remains contradictory. It is one framed by more disciplinary dynamics of power, and a competitive motive around social status and standing, organised around the *rough respectable* class axis. This leaves them feeling vulnerable if they are not seen to be wearing the right brands. As it is practiced and experienced in everyday terms, male to male looking, is still framed to a considerable extent by this kind of hostile gaze or stare. As O20 in group [11.WM] argued, 'there's a lot of people looking at you ... there's people walking and looking down on your clothes you get me.' Thus, Mort and Nixon have usefully analysed some of the changes in the representation of men that occurred with the development of new men's magazines, and with the changes in men's grooming and retail practices. However, there is little evidence that the take up of these 'technologies of the self', has 'unfixed' masculinity, in the way they infer. As I argued at the outset, their work doesn't address the wider impact these texts and practices have subjectively had on working, and lower middle class men. In particular, because of their over reliance on the transformational narrative within post-Fordism *cf* 1(2.2 to 2.3 and 3.1 to 3.4), they fail to critically account for, the continuities of capitalism, not least in terms of the vicissitudes of its social relations, and their psycho-social ramifications.

Thus any assessment of the attempts made in men's magazines to reconstruct the discursive space of masculinity, and their impact on young men's lives needs to factor in, not out, the neo-liberal drive to commodify men's self experience, as 'consuming selves'. *Consuming Brands*, I would argue, demonstrates the aggressive 'male gaze' remains largely intact, as part of a wider classed and classifying optic - despite new patterns of magazine and cosmetics consumption. Above all, this is because, the persistent inequalities of class continue to produce the psychic trauma of subjective class experience, outlined above, focused on the damaging the need for class distinction, and status, as well as social respect.

### **3.7 *Consuming Brands* and researching gender**

With regard to gender, in overall terms, we can again see how crucial analysis of the terrain of the psycho-social is to understanding gender designations and subjectivities. What emerges from the contradictory invocations to be particular kinds of subjects under present neo-liberal conditions, is the impossibility of comfortably occupying the kind of subject positions that are on offer, to young men and young women today. Here the notion that consumption can act to empower young people is clearly rendered problematic. This is because such a notion glosses over the fact that individual 'empowerment' is always played out within the contradictions of the broader hierarchies of social power.

The implications for future research of the persistence of traditional forms of masculinity and femininity, alongside the non-traditional which *Consuming Brands* reveals, are as follows. I would argue, again, the focus of research needs to shift beyond the kind of speculative meta-theorizing which draws on abstract extrapolations about supposed paradigmatic shifts in the economy and in forms of sociality, social organization and identity. In place of extrapolation, the impact of changing textual conceptions and representations of masculinity and femininity needs to be carefully empirically examined, in order to understand how new discursive configurations are taken up and how they produce further dilemmas of the self, which are themselves lived reflexively, emotionally and as a part of particular embodied dispositions. *Consuming Brands* therefore shows how young women *have to* subjectively negotiate a hazardous path through a range of contradictory invocations and discourses. It also shows how

this path (despite all the processes of elision and euphemisation) remains shaped by the unequal psychic and social burden of risk, especially in class terms.

Finally, with regard to gender, I would argue the psychic stress, anxiety and fractured emotional economy which surrounds the gendered experience of consumption should feature, much more centrally, in future research. In particular we need to examine how consumption is mobilized through the contradictory 'self-self' and 'self-other' discourses of both the traditional dependent woman and the new independent self agent (Blackman 2004). Future work needs to examine how these contradictory mobilisations of 'femininity unfixed' (McRobbie 1999) are experienced in a range of specific institutional and social settings and milieus. Research into the gendered dynamics of consumption needs to focus more on how femininity is experienced, negotiated and produced differently according to class position. *Consuming Brands* shows how the femininity which is negotiated, and experienced, by young working class women in inner city or new town schools or colleges may be, worlds apart from that experienced by those who work as creatives on women's magazines, - despite the breaking down of some barriers to entry into this kind of professional work. The same kind of empirical research needs to engage with young men's classed and commodified experience of masculinity, and gender identity. We need to address their experiences of living through the dilemmas posed to the self by new 'detraditionalised', as well as older traditional, versions of masculinity. The method adopted should, again, be prepared to countenance, not cover over, contradictions and dilemmas in discourse, experience and dispositions.

## **Part Four: Conclusion**

### **4. 1 Dilemmas of the self in an increasingly commodified culture?**

What then is the relationship between young peoples' consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity? The preceding sections show young people's subjective understanding of identity is shaped by the judgements they make about both their own, and other people's consumption of branded goods. These judgements of choice and taste lead them to locate their social position in the hierarchy of society, primarily in class terms. However, as we have seen, gender designations and inferences about sexuality, also emerged as closely tied to perceptions of class position. Furthermore, with regard to 'race' the class axis of the *rough and respectable* operates amongst

black, Asian and other non white young people also. It shapes their judgements about what they feel they can consume and who they wish to identify themselves with, and distance themselves from, socially. I argued alongside the *rough respectable* axis, the *mobile sedentary* axis now mapped out the terrain of the social too. With regard to this, we saw how a racialised discourse was applied to some white working class men and women, as a territorializing rhetoric of class euphemisation, fixed and denigrated them as 'Townies', 'Essex girls' etc.

In this project I have criticised Giddens (1991) approach to self agency and identity, given the ideological valorisation of the self, as the 'consuming self', in neo-liberal discourse and techniques of subjectification. This criticism was based on, the disembodied abstraction and tendency to voluntarism in Giddens's concept of the 'reflexive self' (op. cit.). However, despite this criticism, Giddens's formulation of the 'dilemma of a personalised versus a commodified experience of the self' (op. cit.: 196), remains apposite. It crystallises the terrain of the subjective psychic, and social struggle, which the young people in *Consuming Brands* are engaged in, as they live within the ever expanding domain of the consumer. In considering the resolution of this dilemma and struggle, it is important to stress how, despite the very real vicissitudes of class based 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977), documented above, the 'dilemmatic' and 'contradictory dispositions' late teenagers display towards brands mean that they are not wholly subjectified and commodified, as 'consuming selves'. Thus the totalising manner, which a variety of theorists suggest characterises the way subjectification, ideological interpellation, or cultural incorporation, operates, is wide of the mark. However, as we have seen in the case of Mort (1996) and Nixon (1996), neither is it the case that, the invocation to be a 'choosing' 'consuming self', (Rose 1999) unproblematically produces new ways to be either 'men' or 'women'. On the contrary, we have seen a full range of painful and damaging psycho-social ramifications emerge from the subjective experience of overarching class inequalities. Yet, it is just these very inequalities which, paradoxically, both enable and constrain Nike's voluntaristic call to, '*just do it.*'

What is most striking about these teenagers' accounts of being addressed as consumers and of 'choosing', wearing, discussing and so consuming brands, is the degree to which they are able to think and act within, beyond and significantly against the narrow

'vision' of the 'consuming self' of marketing discourse (Cronin 2000). This doesn't, mean that the kind of subjective psychic stress detailed in relation to their 'choice' of branded goods, and its social consequences, can be conveniently contextualised away within a bigger and rosier picture. On the contrary, this kind of 'glossing over' of the emotional stress and anxiety, which consumption creates (*cf* Mort 1996 and Nixon 1996), would mean that it would be much harder to understand the 'relief' from anxiety and indeed the embodied pleasures, that it paradoxically also offers. We saw this emotional 'see saw' of self-esteem emerge in the 'dispositions' described in **Chapter Five**, and in the discussion of 'drawing praise' in **Chapter Six**. As I argued there, we need to understand that the neo-liberal attempt at subjectification, through 'the consuming self', is not based on any abstract disembodied manipulation of passive consumers. Rather, we need to examine how practices of consumption themselves - as evidenced by those who shared their experiences of 'non-uniform day' - help construct and create particular versions of our emotions, notably 'self-esteem', as Despret argued (2004), as part of the wider emotional economy of consumption.

In **Chapters Two and Three**, I argued for an analysis of consumption which takes on board its reflexive ideological, embodied material and emotional dimensions, and their interrelationships. What emerges from *Consuming Brands* is the need to further develop this approach to critical social analysis. With regard to consumption in particular, rather than an approach which tangentially follows one or other of these paths, it is clear that a composite and dialectical approach is needed. If we are to understand the complexities of identity in a global neo-liberal order, in which the notion of disembodied reflexive selves is ideologically counterposed to the experience of the social embodied self, which is raced, gendered and sexualised through the kind of performative (and resistant) agency Butler described, then the dichotomies of individual and society, mind and body etc, will not suffice.

With regard to Butler's work (1993, 1999), I argued, despite her telling emphasis on agency, she produces it without a self-agent, turning agency into a matter of 'deeds' without 'doers' (1999:33). Conversely, I found Charlesworth's (2000) phenomenological approach to the embodiment of class experience highly suggestive. However, Charlesworth presents selves so entirely hewn from their inherited social background, that their embodiment of class experience means subjective self agency all

but vanishes from view. Within my account of subjectification and subjectivity, I agreed with Couldry (2000) that the self was not, as Rose tended to argue, reducible to a series of techniques of subjectification. Rather, as both Žižek (1989,1994) and Vygotsky (1978 [1930/1935]) suggest, the self is the site of an embodied reflexive subjectivity, in which the imaginary and the symbolic, respectively go to work. Thus the subjective terrain of this non-essential subject or self never completely coincides with the domain of the Symbolic Order (Žižek ed 1989: 174), in the manner suggested by more totalizing theory, notably Marcuse (2002 [1962]) and in some versions of poststructuralism. Thus, the self is neither completely filled to the brim discursively and ideologically, nor is it ever wholly materially impregnated. Rather the subjective self uses the symbolic to establish a new take, or what Žižek (1994) called a 'cut into', or in Vygotsky's terms a mediating transformation of the conditions of the material world (op. cit.:13-14).

*Consuming Brands*, therefore, highlights the embodied, precognitive dimensions of consumption, including the pleasure it can provide as a relief from the pressure to be a reflexively rational self, cf 6(2.2). However, it also calls attention to the importance of the capacity for reflexivity in selves who are socially located, and embodied, not the hyper-rational abstract entities of too much social theory (Skeggs 2004). Such reflexivity underpins the dilemmatic nature of common sense consciousness, as Billig contends (1988), and provides the space in which the ongoing series of dilemmas, between the self and the social, I have outlined above are played out. Thus 'the debating chamber of the single mind', which Billig (1988:17) recommends, rather than the schemas of more cognitive approaches to consciousness, explains the 'contrary dispositions' of the consuming self. Albeit with the caveat that the mind is embodied in the materiality and physicality of experience, as the discussions of the emotional economy of consumption have shown, cf 6 .2 (1.1 to 1.2).

*Consuming Brands*, references two versions of social knowledge. On the one hand there is Charlesworth's deeply materially embodied take on class subjectivity, in which working people survive the traumas of class, with the aid of the psychic defence of 'self-willed ignorance' (op. cit.: 182). This may very well be a key part of the explanation for the translation of the social into the subjective, in Rotherham in the 1990s, and of the alignment of the objectively possible with the subjectively probable

(Bourdieu 1986). On the other hand, however, *Consuming Brands* suggests that amongst many of these young people knowledge is, as Žižek argues, less a matter of such 'self-willed ignorance' than of 'cynicism', in which, ideologically speaking, people 'know very well how things really are', but still they behave, 'as if they didn't' (1989: 32). As we saw in **Chapter Five** the range of dispositions towards brands, moved beyond the univalent terrain of the passive active dichotomy, to index the contradictory or 'dual' nature of 'consciousness', which Gramsci (1971) argued, underpinned the potential for agency and for collective resistance.

With regard to the politics of consumption, which in part, drove the design of this project, an understanding of contradiction remains crucial, both for social and cultural analysis, and to counter the symbolic violence directed at young working class people today. If we are to respond to the politics which stigmatise young people in this way, we need to draw attention to the embodied nature of their class dispositions, including the items of clothing which have produced such a racialised discourse, against, 'thugs in hoodies'. We need to ask those with political and symbolic power why they transform a key part of the corporeal 'habitus' of lives marked and diminished by class experience into, 'garments which create negative distinction', (Charlesworth op. cit.:157)? Together with this, we need to appreciate how the contradictory basis of 'cynical' political knowledge, articulated by many of the young people in *Consuming Brands*, offers the hope that 'another world is possible,' and with it a more social, less destructive 'version' of our emotions and selfhood, (Despret 2004).

#### **4.2 *Consuming Brands* and researching the psycho-social**

Finally, as this conclusion has emphasised, *Consuming Brands* has begun to critically open up one important dimension of the terrain of the psycho-social, through its excavation of the subjective experience of consumption under neo-liberalism. It has drawn attention to the individualistic, voluntaristic and rationalist assumptions of much of the previous critical work on consumption within Cultural and Media Studies. It has argued against, and demonstrated how, the binaries of the global and the local, the individual and the social, the passive and the active consumer are not only theoretically inadequate, but that they fail to account for the complex dialectical contradictions which characterise young people's experience of consumption and social life, more generally.

Challenging the abstraction and lack of people of too much contemporary Culturalist work, I have focused on the neglected subjective experience of consumption. This focus, I've argued, has demonstrated how the psycho-social terrain of consumption is made up by a particular set of emotional practices of 'self-esteem', which are inextricably linked to the embodied experience of consumption. It has therefore shown how important the analysis of the subjective, the psychological and the emotional is to cultural and social theory, and to critical and left politics, more generally. In doing this, it has placed the contradictory nature of the social subjective experience of being addressed as a 'choosing' 'consuming' self onto the research agenda. As I have stressed above, this project, which has focused on what is extraordinary in apparently ordinary everyday consumption, argues for a form of research into the subjective experience of neo-liberalism which needs to be both more explicitly politically focused, and policy driven. As my analysis shows, the psycho-social fabric of the every day consumption of branded goods by young consumers is every bit as important to Cultural Studies, as work which has focused on the seminal role of stylepreneurs, elites and cognoscenti. Moreover, as I have suggested, it is time to research the experience of class based 'symbolic violence' which fixes and devalues some as sedentary, while elevating others as cosmopolitan mobile transformative selves.

I have argued for the future direction of research, to reflect this agenda, and for it to engage with how we learn to consume across a range of institutional contexts. I have proposed we need more research which is prepared to attend to the psychic stress and trauma of classed, gendered and racialised lives, particularly in the context of the adjudication of the expanded domain of our consumer 'choices'. The work I have begun here contributes to the prizing apart of the 'black box' of needs and desires which surround consumption, and the undertheorised concept of choice in market societies. If we are to further understand the psycho-social terrain of neo-liberal capitalism, with its contradictory invocations of the self, its bullying and 'see-saw' emotional economy of anxiety and pleasure, of threat and opportunity, in which the thrill of social success is so cruelly intertwined with the burden of risk and of social failure, then we need to furnish and mobilise more social and cultural research in this subjective psycho-social direction.

## Appendix One

### 'Consuming Brands' Focus Group Index

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <b>WW</b> Walthamstow FE College     | - 4 Young Women                              |
| 2. <b>HW</b> Herts Sixth Form           | - 5 Young Women                              |
| 3. <b>HM</b> Herts Sixth Form           | - 6 Young Men                                |
| 4. <b>CHM</b> Cheshunt Herts Sixth Form | - 3 Young Men                                |
| 5. <b>HEM</b> Essex Harlow FE College   | - 6 Young Men                                |
| 6. <b>HEMX</b> Essex Harlow FE College  | - 2 Young Men 2 Young women                  |
| 7. <b>BEM</b> Essex Basildon FE College | - 3 Young Men                                |
| 8. <b>WW</b> Walthamstow FE College     | - 5 Young Women                              |
| 9. <b>WMX</b> Walthamstow FE College    | - 4 Young Women 3 Young men                  |
| 10. <b>WM</b> Walthamstow FE College    | - 4 Young Men                                |
| 11. <b>WM</b> Walthamstow FE College    | - 5 Young Men                                |
| 12. <b>WM</b> Walthamstow FE College    | - 6 Young Men                                |
| 13. <b>HW</b> Herts Sixth Form College  | - 3 Young Women                              |
| 14. <b>HEW</b> Essex Harlow FE College  | - 2 Young Women                              |
| 15. <b>HESW</b> Herts Sixth Form        | - 3 Young Women – <b>Nb Recording Failed</b> |
| 16. <b>WSM</b> W'Stow Sixth Form        | - 4 Young Men                                |
| 17. <b>WSW</b> W'Stow Sixth Form        | - 5 Young Women                              |
| 18. <b>WSM</b> W'Stow Sixth Form        | - 5 Young Men                                |
| 19. <b>WSW</b> W'Stow Sixth Form        | - 5 Young Women                              |
| 20. <b>WSM</b> W'Stow Sixth Form        | - 4 Young Women                              |

#### Note on the *in thesis* referencing system for focus group extracts

The referencing system indexes gender as follows. **M** for men, **W** for women, signifies these were all male or all female groups, respectively. **MX** indicates a mixed gender group as detailed above. Each group is also identified geographically e.g. **BE** is used for **Basildon Essex**, **HE** for **Harlow Essex**, **W** for **Walthamstow** etc. Thus the reference [7.**BEM**] on page 17 indicates focus group number seven, made up of men from **Basildon Essex**. (7.**BEM**.22), used to preface longer section of transcription, indicates the same, with the transcript page number following. Where individual speech extracts are quoted, the initial of the speaker is given followed by the transcript page number e.g. **J10**, as given on page 133 of the thesis.

Where lines of transcription in the extracts are not continuous the number of lines omitted (five here) is indicated using the forward slash symbol **////** like so.

## Appendix Two

### Focus Group Guidance Sheet

Branding Identity Focus Gp\_\_ Session No      Date \_\_\_\_\_

Present:

1.	2.
3.	4.
5.	6.

Introduction: Hi everyone I'm Tony and I want to start by thanking you all for giving up your time to take part in this research.

I'm going to record your discussion today on tape. This will not be played to anyone else here either students or teachers. The only people who might hear it are people involved in assessing my research.

So this recording is confidential in that all of your names will be changed in the transcription. If this research is published in a book, your comments will appear as made-up names. However, because we are in group, confidentiality is your responsibility too, so I need to get your agreement not to repeat anything, which you might hear which might embarrass anyone in the group. Is that okay? Do you agree?

Before we start:-

- A) I need to explain the format for focus groups. This is not an interview either individual or group. It's a focus group discussion, which means I'll ask some questions and get you to do some tasks – so you should discuss your views with whole the group. You don't need to answer me directly, there's no need to look at me when you answer questions, I'd like to encourage you to talk to each other. The questions are there to start discussion.
- B) Please give your views to the rest of the group. I want you to discuss what I get you to do and to feel free to disagree with what others say. This is not a class and there are no right or wrong answers. Getting a range of views from everybody is important to me.
- C) Everything you say will have to be written down by me afterwards i.e. transcribed from the tape recording, so can you help me by speaking clearly, loudly and preferably one at a time.
- D) This is going to take an hour and ten minutes maximum

### **Part (1) Opening Questions (15)**

Write your name on the answer sheet, along with your parents or Guardians' occupation or job, your age and your ethnicity. Then write down as many brands as you can in the next 30 seconds.

1. Tell the group the first two brands you wrote down.
2. Tell the group your favourite brand and what you like about it?
3. As a group what kind of things, people, words, ideas come into your mind when you see this brand logo?  
Nike
  - What does the Nike brand mean to you?
  - What is a brand?

### **Part (2) Adverts' Task (20)**

Have a quick look at the adverts. Choose the advert you think you like the best?

1. Write down one thing you like about the advert and one thing you dislike?
2. Tell us what you liked and disliked?
3. What do you think are the best things about brands?
4. What are the worst things about brands?
  - Do you think brands make people more aware of their appearance or image ?
  - Is it a good or bad thing to be image aware or image conscious?
  - Do you think that brands put pressure on people?
  - How? Who? Parents or kids?

### **Part (3) Brand Logos' Task (20)**

1. From the brand Logo sheet choose one brand you like & one you dislike and tell us why?
2. Which brands would you never wear or buy and why?
3. How do you decide which brand is for you?

4. How does wearing your favourite brand make you feel?
5. What does wearing a brand like Nike, Versace or Gucci tell you about someone?
  - Do you think you can tell what a person is like from the brands they wear?
6. Do you think people are judged by the brands they wear?
  - What do you think about this?
  - How do you feel about being judged by other people because of the brands you wear?
7. How important are branded goods and clothes to you?
  - How important are brands to young people?
  - Why are they important, in what ways?
  - How would you feel if you couldn't afford the latest brand of clothes, trainers or phone?

### **QUESTIONS Part (4) (10)**

1. Thinking back to when you started college or work or when you last met new people socially.
  - Do you think that brands can help to express your personality? In what ways?
  - Do you feel that brands make you more individual? In what ways?
  - Do you feel that brands can help you to fit in (to a group)? Give examples
2. What's the most important part of your identity?
3. Do you think brands make people happy? Why?
4. Brands have been criticised by some people, why is this and what do you think about it?
5. You've said that you think brands are.....is this a fair summary of what's been said?

### **SUMMARY**

6. Is there anything else you would like to say about brands, that we've missed ?

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