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'You just wear what you want don't yer'? an empirical examination of the relationship between youth consumption and the construction of identity

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**"You just wear what you want don't yer"? An empirical  
examination of the relationship between youth consumption and  
the construction of identity**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## ABSTRACT

### **"You just wear what you want don't yer"? An empirical examination of the relationship between youth consumption and the construction of identity**

The social scientific debate over consumption is of increasing concern to commentators addressing the cultural implications of socio-economic change. All too often, however, the individual meanings that consumers have for the goods they consume have been neglected by these commentators, notably in favour of abstract discussions of the role of consumption in the emergence of a 'postmodern' culture. Arguing that consumption provides the sociologist with an invaluable means of addressing questions concerning the relationship between structure and agency, this thesis attempts to move beyond the limited conception of a fragmented self, picking and choosing his or her identity from the menu of life, to begin to establish an empirical grounding for the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people. Data were collected from a triangulated three-stage research process, in the form of a series of focus group interviews, informed by Personal Construct Psychology, a participant observation study in a sports shop, and a Consumer Meanings Questionnaire. Arguing that young people's identities are largely constructed in peer group settings, the evidence presented suggests that consumption provides an everyday cultural framework, within which young consumers negotiate some semblance of everyday stability in a 'risk' society. In this sense, young people appear to pursue a dual task. First, they are intent upon forming group-based identities. Second, they attempt to construct a sense of individuality in this context. Hence, it is argued that whilst young people choose consumer goods according to peer group meanings, they tend to see their own choices as 'individual' and those of their peers as being determined by media and marketing-created desires. As such, whilst it would be misleading to see young people as dupes of the capitalist system, neither are they free agents. Teenagers construct their identities partially through the framework that consumption provides, but not with products of their own choosing. Far from being whimsical consumers in this context, I argue that essentially, young people are modernists, adapting to the rational constraints upon their everyday lives and changing the character of their consumption patterns accordingly. The situated realities of so-called postmodern forms of consumption can therefore only be understood, it is argued, through innovative triangulated research methods which address consumer *meanings* in routine everyday settings and which, in turn, consider the theoretical implications of such meanings, for both an understanding of the ideological impact of consumerism and its relationship to debates concerning structure and agency.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In recent years consumption has emerged as a major area of investigation amongst sociologists and yet sociology is apparently no nearer to coming to terms with the significance of the relationship between consumption and identity. This thesis will use grounded triangulated research techniques to address this question and by doing so will begin to identify the psycho-social impact of consumption upon young people's everyday lives.

The significance of consumption to consumers everyday lives is a much debated, though apparently rarely researched, topic which touches upon a variety of theoretical and conceptual issues. I suggest in this thesis, that such a significance is most readily understood in an analysis of the relationship between consumption and identity. In particular, I argue that this issue should be addressed empirically, in as much as theoretical insights cannot be expected to stand alone without empirical validation. To this end, through the course of this thesis, I will present a three phase research programme incorporating focus group interviews, a participant observation, and a Consumer Meanings Questionnaire. By doing so, I intend to address some of the imbalances that have characterised what are formative years in the emergence of a sociology of consumption.

At an intuitive level consumption is important to the everyday construction of our social lives. Long term economic and social change have emerged hand-in-hand; apparently making our roles as consumers increasingly significant to how we conduct our everyday experience. The globalisation of economies and the

move to apparently more diverse segmented markets have had significant effects, in turn, for the conduct of social life. And yet, little empirical research has been conducted into the significance of consumption in the construction of our social lives. Even less has addressed the actual psychological impact of our experience as consumers.

It might indeed be argued that sociology has had little tangible success in coming to terms with the changing historical role of consumption. Though the long term historical changes have been discussed and analysed in great depth (e.g. Benson, 1993; Lansley, 1994), particularly in relation to the emergence of the New Right and the implications of their policies in lionising the attributes of consumerism (e.g. Hall, 1988), not much has been achieved in analysing the effect of such social change at the micro-level. The societal impact of consumption cannot be fully realised without equal consideration of its micro-social expression. For this reason, amongst others, a theme that runs throughout this thesis is the question of structure and agency.

I argue that consumption plays an important role in balancing the relationship between the determining power of social structures and the ability of people to make their own interpretations of these structures, in terms of individual agency. In turn, the ideological influence of consumerism, and the degree to which such an ideology constrains individual freedom is an important issue in underlying everyday social relations in a society which intuitively appears to place so much emphasis on the freedom of the consumer. In effect, I argue that the relationship between structure and agency and consumption should be one of the over-riding concerns of contemporary sociological *research*. The onus here, on the word *research*, reflects my concern that these issues cannot be understood through theorising alone. In particular, no basis for an understanding of the ideological

impact of consumerism can be established without recourse to grounded analyses of the consuming experience.

This emphasis on the grounded, routine, aspects of consumption is pursued in contrast to the more theoretically abstract approaches to consumption that have tended to characterise sociological considerations of consumption, particularly in relation to debates concerning postmodernity. Despite some of the theoretical insights that this trend has engendered and despite its value in highlighting the significance of the cultural in its own right, I will argue, during the course of this thesis, that such developments have, in many ways, been counter-productive. What this research hopes to do then, is highlight the need for the development of a sociology of consumption that not only can address, directly, the question of structure and agency in the context of consumption, but does so by marrying theoretical insight with grounded empirical research.

This research addresses the relationship between consumption and *identity*. I therefore make the contention that the experience of contemporary society is best engendered in the debate as to whether what we consume is who we are (see Dittmar, 1992). By attempting to understand the relationship between consumption and identity it may be possible to come to terms with the complexities involved in how consumption influences our social lives. I identify *youth* as worthy of special attention in this context in that, at a common-sensical level, young people's identities are often implicated, notably in the context of the media, as being particularly affected by their relationships with consumer goods (e.g. Maxted, 1995). This research therefore intends to address how important consumption is to *who* young people feel they are. From this basis, it might be possible to begin to consider wider questions as to the impact of consumption upon identities through the life-course.

An emphasis that will therefore run throughout this thesis is that of consumer experience. This thesis highlights the need for the sociology of consumption to address the routine experiential aspects of consumption, the argument being that because that experience appears to have become so important to our everyday lives, it should provide the basis from which we critically address the *psycho-social* significance of consumption. In this respect, I will consider how far consumption has significant psychological as well as sociological implications, and, in turn, how far the notion of identity might help to unravel these implications.

### **The structure of the thesis**

Throughout the remainder of this introduction I will outline the overall structure of the thesis. In developing an empirical analysis of the relationship between consumption and identity it is clearly necessary to lay the conceptual foundations upon which my research will be grounded. In order to do so I will address the following issues prior to analysing my data collection: consumption; identity; youth; and structure and agency.

In *Chapter 2*, I will discuss why it is that consumption has emerged as a significant area of sociological debate. I will chart the historical rise of a consumer society and consider that society within the context of classical social theory and the rise of a sociology of consumption in it's own right. Special attention will be paid at this point to the role of consumption in a critical discussion of postmodern theory and to why it is that consumption should be perceived as a *psycho-social* phenomenon.

*Chapter 3* will focus upon the question of identity construction in contemporary society, and how the nature of those constructions may have altered historically. After considering the broad problems inherent in addressing questions of

identity I will look in more detail at four particular theoretical approaches, all of which, I will argue, have some contribution to make to the debate over identity; namely: Erik Erikson, symbolic interactionism, social identity theory, and postmodernism. From this basis, though arguing that it is in itself impossible to construct an authoritative definition of identity in as much as identity is a highly complex and apparently contradictory concept, I begin to attempt to come to terms with what constitutes identity construction in contemporary consumer societies. From this position, I am able to begin to consider, from an initial conceptual basis, what role consumption may or may not have in the construction of identities.

In *Chapter 4*, I consider these issues more directly in the context of the question of youth. Suggesting that during a person's youth the question of identity looms particularly large, I argue, in turn, that youth is an especially important barometer of social change. In this context, I prioritise the notion of a risk society, as expressed in the work of authors such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), as characterising the contemporary life experience of young people and suggest that consumption may have some role to play in this process. I thus go on to discuss youth lifestyles and consumption, focusing, in particular, on the question of peer influence. I then begin to bring some of the above issues together in the form of a brief consideration of debates over the role of consumption in the construction of youth identities.

*Chapter 5* seeks to give the above discussions a more concentrated focus as I begin to move towards shaping my research question. I argue that debates over structure, agency and indeed, ideology, are crucial to any understanding of the impact of consumption upon people's lives in a consumer society and vice versa. I point out, at this stage, that the structure and agency question is a key concern of sociological theorising; a concern that is well expressed by the extreme

interpretations that have been explicated concerning the role of consumption in modern societies. Thus, I note developments in the broad debate which exists between two extremes, one which sees consumption as self-liberating, and the other as inherently controlling. I argue that neither approach is satisfactory and that what is necessary is a more 'structuralist' approach to the role of consumption in contemporary consumer societies. To this end, I focus on Giddens' approach to structuration and what he can tell us about the significance of consumption in this context. In turn, I further highlight the significance of the relationship between consumption and the structure and agency question with a consideration of the seminal works of Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu. Highlighting the role of the relationship between structure and agency and ideology, I then move on to discuss the ideological dimensions of consumerism, if they can indeed be said to exist, in contemporary consumer culture.

The above discussions provide the basis upon which I construct an actual research question. In *Chapter 6*, I bring the above debates together in order to frame the substantive issues that I want to address during the empirical sections of the thesis. I then discuss, in some detail, the nature of my methodological approach and the rationale behind that approach. In the following three chapters I therefore discuss the findings I collected from my focus group interviews, participant observation and Consumer Meanings Questionnaire.

Though, as I have already suggested, I will discuss the rationale behind each stage of my research in more detail in *Chapter 6*, at this point, it is worth briefly identifying the methods that were implemented. My focus group interviews, as I will discuss in *Chapter 7*, were concerned with addressing the role which consumption plays in the lives of young people. This provided me with an initial platform from which I could consider the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people. However, the suggestion here is that the



relationship between consumption and identity amounts to a very complex question and as such needs to be addressed from a variety of angles. A participant observation was therefore deemed the most appropriate course of action as a means of addressing young people's relationships to consumer goods in a site of consumption (*Chapter 8*). Having conducted my participant observation, the final stage of my research involved a Consumer Meanings Questionnaire which attempted to broaden my investigative focus in order to construct a more generalisable analysis of the role of consumption in the construction of young people's identities (*Chapter 9*).

*Chapter 10* is my discussion chapter, during which I bring together my empirical findings with the conceptual debates I raise in *Chapters 2 to 5*. I then go on to discuss the implications of my findings for the future direction of the sociology of consumption.

The overall emphasis here, then, is on the construction of a theoretically and empirically informed conception of the relationship between consumption and identity which emphasises the significance of young consumers' everyday experiences. In effect, what I suggest throughout this thesis is that consumption amounts to an important social, psychological and ideological, influence on people's everyday lives. The fact that the conceptualisation of these influences, in itself, appears to be such a daunting task, should not put the sociologist off what amounts to a difficult, though potentially rewarding enterprise. Consumption has, I contend, emerged as a prime underlying influence on life in a so-called postmodern world. The role that influence has in the construction of identities will be the prime focus of the following nine chapters. As such I hope that as a whole this thesis will help, in some small way, to begin to clarify both the everyday and ideological implications of consumption. In effect, I attempt to come to terms with the apparent paradoxes which appear to characterise the

consuming experience. Herein lies the significance of the first part of my title, "You just wear what you want don't yer?"; a quotation from one of my respondents which captures nicely the sorts of theoretical dilemmas associated with structure and agency which were highlighted so forcibly during the course of this research. A fundamental issue that arises time and time again throughout both the conceptual and empirical chapters of the thesis is the way in which consumption appears to be both constraining and yet enabling. It is in this sense that the experience of consumers in contemporary consumer society is parallel to the intricacies of the relationship between structure and agency. Consumption appears to offer plenty of opportunities and freedoms to the young consumer, but at the same time it can reasonably be argued that such freedoms are constructed by a marketplace determined to maximise profits in an increasingly influential youth market. What is of interest to this thesis then, is in what way, if indeed at all, such apparently paradoxical psycho-social phenomena actively affect the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Consumption**

There has been a proliferation of social scientific literature dealing with the topic of consumption in recent years. Work by authors such as Bocoock (1993), Cross (1993), Fine and Leopold (1993), Gabriel and Lang (1995) and Lee (1993), illustrate the significance consumption has come to have as a focus for social scientific debate. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that consumption has become one of the key concerns of late twentieth century sociology. Though Bocoock (1993) suggests that the deep recession experienced in both in Britain and the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, will lead to a deceleration in the academic interest of consumption, there is still to be any such evidence of any sort of a backlash. Consumption, shopping, advertising, and the ownership of possessions continue to play some sort of a role, however significant, in what it is to experience modern life, and therefore continue to be important sociological concerns. In order to illustrate this point, in this chapter I will present a preliminary overview of what I will identify as being some of the key historical and theoretical issues which have emerged around the social scientific question of consumption. I do not intend this overview to be comprehensive at this stage. Such issues will be developed further in Chapters 3 to 6. Rather I intend to provide some form of benchmark of the broad concerns that impart influence on this thesis as a whole.

#### **The rise of a consumer society**

Consumption did not emerge as a serious subject of concern to sociologists until the second half of the twentieth century. Previously, the productivist vision of modernity saw the relations and experiences characteristic of work as

fundamental to the shaping of social life. In this context consumption was largely ignored. As such it is possible to identify,

“...a series of trends which have led to an overwhelming concentration on the area of production as the key generative arena for the emergence of the dominant social relations in contemporary societies, and a comparative neglect of consumption, together with a concomitant failure to observe the actual changes which have taken place over the last century in the balance of influence between these two forms of interactions with goods.” (Miller, 1987, p.3)

In order to come to terms with the emergence of consumption as a key sociological issue, it is necessary at this stage to provide some historical background. Indeed, it is important that the longer term historical aspects of the emergence of a consumer society are not neglected. However, although I accept that, to an extent, consumption has always been part of the experience of modern life, I will argue that that experience has become more pivotal in the context of more recent history, notably towards the end of the twentieth century.

One of the most useful approaches to the long term historical significance of consumption is the work of McKendrick et al. (1982) who identify a consumer revolution in eighteenth century England, where for the first time it was possible to identify a society within which material possessions became prized less and less for their durability and more and more for their fashionability. Yet Braudel (1974) goes one step further than McKendrick et al. (1982), in arguing that exchange relations had developed in a sophisticated manner even before industrialisation, notably in the guise of the seventeenth century French market; fairs and carnivals being focal points of consumption.

As such, theoretical developments mirrored social developments associated with the emergence of an increasingly prosperous society. A society in which, as Benson (1994) notes, material changes increased consumers' capacity for consumption. Though there is little agreement as to when the "consumer revolution" occurred (McKendrick et al. 1982), apparently anywhere between the sixteenth century and the 1980s, Benson (1993) sees this as a long term development and, in particular, focuses on the increased demand produced by a rapidly expanding population between the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. These changes in demand were accompanied by changes in supply in an increasingly expanding marketplace which came to direct its goods to the attention of those consumers whose purchasing power was increasing most rapidly (Benson, 1993). Such developments can be closely related to the emergence of what many commentators, not least the Frankfurt School (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1973), refer to as a "mass society"; the concentration of the population in urban centres exposing urban dwellers to an increasingly plethora of consumer goods.

The rise of a consumer society clearly came into its own with the onset of industrialisation. As production for subsistence came to be replaced by wage labour, people inevitably became consumers as well as producers. As such, from a long term historical point of view there emerged evidence of a radically different way of life, in terms of social structures, social values and attitudes. Gradually then, a new type of society developed; a society built upon the thirst for novelty; novelty that the economic system became more than willing to perpetuate.

In this respect a crucial development in the emergence of the consumer society was the growth of working class purchasing power. The post second-World War years saw the emergence of a mass market, based, at least to some extent, on the

principles of Fordism, which involved the payment of higher wages than previously, thereby providing the worker with the surplus necessary for him or her to purchase consumer goods. Indeed, the pioneer of Fordist practice, Henry Ford, proffered the notion that workers should be encouraged to be consumers of the very products they produced. In this environment, whilst mass production ensured, on the one hand, that standardised, easily produced goods could be introduced to the market at minimum cost, on the other, the surpluses made available to the workers offset a periodic danger, one that capitalism had, up to now, always been forced to face, namely the effect of a slump or depression. The benefit of such developments for the consumer was the fact that items that had previously been luxuries gradually became everyday items. Consumption came to play an increasingly important role in people's everyday lives. Some commentators saw this process as inherently liberating for the working classes, in that the active nature of consumption meant that the 'masses' became incorporated in a society from which they were once excluded (see Bell, 1976).

Consumerism therefore incorporated a qualitatively new experience of society. Indeed, Cross (1993) considers various sets of figures that reflect the emergence of a consumer society. He identifies an unprecedented degree of access to durable goods in the latter half of the twentieth century. Focusing, in particular, on the American example, Cross notes that disposable household income in the United States rose from \$15, 110 in 1940 to \$26, 313 in 1970 and \$28, 607 in 1979. Whilst between 1935 and 1970 home ownership nearly tripled for white wage-earning families and doubled for black families. The impact of consumerism was equally impressive in Britain, although tempered slightly by the initial priority of recovering from the Second World War.

Whilst acknowledging the fact that the emergence of a consumer society was a long term historical process, I would like to argue, at this point, that it was not

until the second half of the twentieth century that consumption came to play a very significant role in the construction of people's everyday lives. Indeed, it will be argued here that though the long-term implications of a consumer revolution were gradually being felt by an increasing percentage of the population of the western world, its impact was in fact variable. It was not until the 1950s that the accessibility of consumer goods began to transcend social classes, and that the status-inferring qualities discussed decades earlier by Veblen (1994) came to have a more general social relevance. With developments in the economy, as Bocock (1993) points out, post-war workers came to have access to resources that meant that they could consider purchasing new objects such as television sets and cars, as well as providing for their families more basic needs. Accompanied, indeed encouraged, by the rise of advertising, a whole new world of consumerism was on offer to the working majority, most especially to groups of young people, who were able to exploit this new situation as long as the resources were available to them. What was emerging was not merely a consumer society, but a consumer *culture*.

Bocock (1993) therefore suggests that it was in the aftermath of the 1950s that consumption sectors became ever more specific and focused. As capitalism developed alongside improved technology and management practices, usually discussed in the context of post-Fordism (eg Piore and Sabel, 1985), there was an argument for saying that fixed status groups and social classes were being undermined as consumer lifestyles became the name of the day (Featherstone, 1991).

In this context, the work of Martyn Lee (1993) is of particular interest. Lee talks about the re-birth of consumer culture. Suggesting that consumption represents the point at which economic practice and cultural practice combine, Lee charts the rise and fall of a mass consumption society in the post-war years, followed by

the re-awakening of the consumer society in which we live today. In particular, Lee identifies the role played in this process by the emergence of a new diversified commodity form. Most markedly, it is was during the 1980s argues Lee, that the aesthetics, design and style of consumption became increasingly diverse, as the marketplace became ever more sophisticated as regards to what it knew, and what it wanted to know, about it's consumers. Thus, Lee suggests that if there have been any significant changes to the regime of accumulation and its mode of regulation in the late twentieth century then such changes are revealed not so much in the production side of the equation, but more in terms of the changing composition and design of the symbolic commodity form. It is in this sense, I would suggest, that consumption came to play a fundamentally formative social role in modern societies.

There is no doubt that the trends Lee discusses have been amplified in the last fifteen years by political ideologies (which are often neglected by contemporary theorists) and rhetoric, that have served to transform both the cultural as well as the political landscape (Hall and Jacques, 1989). The relationship between consumption and identity and it's emergence as a topic for sociological debate is related to the way in which the individualistic ethos of the New Right has come to pervade consumers' experiences of everyday life. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that consumerism was proposed by the Thatcher government of the 1980s as a prime focus of people's lives, and that that proposal was gratefully consumed by sections of the population who took the opportunity to purchase their own council houses and take their annual holidays abroad.

Consumption has clearly been hijacked by politicians of various creeds, parties and ideologies. In effect as Keat et al. (1994) note, consumer freedom has come to be equated with political freedom. What has happened historically is that consumerism has come to be seen as essentially democratic, and has been



marketed to the population as such, despite, the inevitable question marks over access to resources. But as Ewen (1976) notes in his book *Captains of Consciousness*, democracy does not merely flow out of peoples desires, but actively reflects their ability to participate in a value-structure. Consumerism offers an apparently democratic value-structure which the New Right have been able to exploit for their own political benefits. Thus, whilst superficially appearing to withdraw state intervention, what has happened appears to be that government influence over consumers everyday lives is arguably intensified at the core through the transmission of a new mode of ideology, namely consumerism. This ideology proffers the 'rights' of the individual consumer and as such defines political citizenship through charters (e.g. 'The Patients' Charter'; 'The Citizens' Charter'), rather than in terms of active domestic participation (see McKenzie, 1995). It is in this sense that the citizen as a consumer is essentially passive. I will discuss the ideological implications of consumerism in more detail during the course of Chapter 5. In the meantime I want to contextualise the issues I have discussed above by considering in more detail some of the theoretical approaches to the debate over consumption.

### **Consumption in classical social theory**

Before I go on to consider some of the ways in which contemporary sociological theory comprehends the changing role of consumption in contemporary western societies I should, briefly, consider one or two of the more significant classical approaches to the consumption question. By doing so, I hope to illustrate that whilst historically the sociology of consumption has incorporated macro-structural issues, in more recent times it has been more concerned with what I shall describe as 'macro-cultural' issues (see Chapter 6).

Although it could be argued that the tendency has been to exaggerate the extent to which sociology has neglected consumption as a focus for debate, as Fine and

Leopold (1993) point out, it would be fair to suggest, as I pointed out earlier in this chapter, that traditionally sociology has emphasised the role of production in the development of capitalism at the expense of cultural aspects of consumption, not least in the formative works of Marx (1990). Marx's understanding of the *commodity* was contextualised purely by the production process. It was the production of commodities rather than their consumption upon which he focused his attention. As Bocock (1993) points out, therefore, it was the sale of a product that was significant in this respect rather than the ways in which that product was used or consumed. In this sense contemporary capitalism is a markedly different animal to the one that Marx (1990) was talking about in the mid-late nineteenth century.

It is also important not to forget that Marx's vision of the demise of capitalism was misplaced. Above all, what undermines Marx's limited conception of the commodity is the fact that capitalism went on, undeterred, to develop ever more subtle means of regeneration until the latter half of the twentieth century when consumer capitalism emerged all-powerful. In this context, it might well be argued that Marx underestimated not only the versatility of capitalism, but also the everyday impact of the commodity, and of consumption.

Despite these reservations, Marx left the sociologist with an invaluable, albeit an historically specific, legacy, in terms of an analysis of the role of consumption in the development of capitalism. Indeed, Marx's understanding of the alienation of the worker through the extraction of a surplus represents a key to understanding the ways in which workers are 'forced' to become consumers, by buying the products they or their fellow workers have made. By earning wages or salaries and by being obliged to become embroiled in consumer culture (though far more so than Marx could have possibly envisaged) the wheels of capitalism were effectively oiled by the workers themselves. In this context, the sociologist of

consumption owes a debt to Marx for addressing questions that would later provide the basis for a sociology of consumption in its own right.

Other theorists went one step further than Marx in addressing the impact of consumption on the societies in which they lived. Weber (1971), for instance, discussed the role of Calvinism in encouraging hard-working pious attitudes that encouraged workers *not* to consume the surplus they had at their disposal. From this point of view, capitalism emerged precisely because of a work ethic that encouraged re-investment rather than consumption. But perhaps the most significant classical contribution to a sociological understanding of work can be found in the writings of Veblen (1994) who saw consumer goods as markers of social prestige and status. In his analysis of the American nouveaux riches of the late nineteenth century Veblen (1994) described a “new leisure class” intent on mimicking the lifestyles of the upper classes in Europe. In turn, Veblen (1994) argued that the higher social groupings continually updated their consumption habits in order to stay that one step ahead of the nouveaux riches. As such, consumption was significant largely for its status inferring qualities, in that what was emerging was a hierarchically organised social structure based upon the prestigious consumption patterns of the rich.

Significantly, Veblen’s (1994) work remained in the sociological wilderness until it regained popularity with the realisation, notably during the 1980s, that consumption was, after all, worth considering for its own ends. Indeed, only recently have serious efforts been made to redress the balance, in an attempt to understand consumption *per se*.

### **The emergence of a sociology of consumption**

Arguably, a sociology of consumption did not actually begin to emerge in its own right (and it continues to do so), until the aftermath of the work of Saunders

(1981) who calls for the prioritisation of a consumption-oriented paradigm. Saunders argues that class (or the relationship to the means of production) is no longer a fundamental determinant of contemporary life experience. What is more important in this respect, he argues, is differences in access to consumption. As such, from his free market liberal perspective, Saunders focuses on the impact of privatised consumption, arguing that the fundamental division in contemporary societies is between those who have the available resources to play an active role in the free market and those whose lives are dependant upon the welfare state. Whilst Saunders may be criticised on several counts, for instance, for over-exaggerating the opportunities provided by the marketplace, and for presenting a narrow concept of consumption which is limited by his representation of privatised and collective consumption (see Warde, 1990a); he should be commended for highlighting the significance of consumption in the sociological 'enterprise', by provoking considerable sociological debate around the question of consumption.

Equally significant, in this regard was the work which began to see consumption as a negotiated realm in which consumers, and often young people, could express their resistance to dominant orders (e.g. deCerteau, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Willis, 1990). Such debates have further been extended in the important works of authors such as Otnes (1988), Miller (1987) and McCracken (1990). In this respect, it is certainly fair to say that since Saunders' (1981) call for a consumption-oriented paradigm, sociological approaches to consumption have actually moved more towards addressing the *symbolic* role of consumption. Such developments were further extended with a special edition of *Sociology*, which established the sociology of consumption firmly on the sociological agenda (see Warde, 1990b; Campbell, 1995). Such an agenda rapidly became associated with broader sociological discussions concerning postmodernity.

## **Consumption and postmodernism**

Gradually the increasingly formative role of consumption in social life, in its own right, has come to be acknowledged by social theorists, and as such the sociology of consumption has increasingly been diverted down a postmodern route. Indeed, the acknowledgement of the formative role of consumption is largely thanks, as Fine and Leopold (1993) point out, to theoretical concern with the 'post' rather than the past. In particular, broad debates over postmodernity (and to a lesser extent post-Fordism) have highlighted the potential diversities available to consumers, the consequence being that consumption has emerged as an increasingly autonomous focus for debate. Postmodern analyses of the contemporary life experience focus, by their very nature, on the qualities and experience of mass-mediated consumer culture. Work such as that of Jameson (1984) and Urry (1990) whose reasoned, contextualised, analysis of postmodern debates are more effective than most, can be commended for helping to establish consumption as a sociological priority. The cultural contexts in which consumption operates have also been prioritised in this context.

A common theme that runs through the current sociological literature on consumption is that contemporary society is essentially fragmented. The transition from a modern to a postmodern world has incorporated the dominance of the mass-mediated spectacle (Baudrillard, 1983) and thus the figurative role of consumption in the contemporary life experience. Reality, in effect, is seen to implode in a postmodern world, in the sense that distinctions between high and low brow culture become obscured, as history, for instance, becomes heritage and the museum a 'hands-on' multi-media consumer experience (Lyon, 1994),

“Once established, such a culture of consumption is quite indiscriminating and everything becomes a consumer item, including meaning, truth and knowledge.” (Sampson, 1994, p. 37)

More significantly, as Bauman (1992) notes, consumer conduct appears to have moved, “into the position of, simultaneously, the cognitive and moral focus of life, the integrative bond of the society, and the focus of systematic management” (p. 49). In effect, argues Bauman (1992), choice, and especially consumer choice, become the foundation of a new concept of freedom in contemporary society; the argument being that in contemporary society the freedom of the individual is actively constituted in his or her role as a consumer.

The individual is therefore able to adopt a wide variety of identities in a postmodern culture, each of which has its own role to play in the specific everyday situations that an individual encounters with the move towards a postmodern world. There is no such thing as a ‘real self’; rather the individual is free to construct several identities from the vast diversities available to him or her on the menu of life (see Chapter 3).

Bearing in mind the fact that it is impossible to do justice to the broad spectrum of debates associated with postmodernity (the extent to which postmodernity represents an epochal shift being a particular bone of contention) at this stage I will concentrate on two particularly well known approaches to the debate over consumption that operate within a postmodern framework, namely, Rob Shields’ (1992a) collection *Lifestyle Shopping* and Mike Featherstone’s (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*.

Shields’ collection deals specifically with the cultural significance of shopping environments. As such in his introduction Shields (1992a) talks of the need to

treat consumption as “an active committed production of self” (p.2). In this respect, the role of consumption is seen as both solidifying a sense of self and confirming that sense of self as social, through membership of a shopping fraternity, in the physical form of the shopping mall. As such, in the same collection, Langman (1992) describes the shopping mall as a,

“pseudo-democratic twilight zone between reality and a commercially produced fantasy world of commodified goods, images and leisure activities that gratify transformed desire and provide packaged self-images to a distinctive form of subjectivity.” (p.40)

Thus, Langman (1992) goes on to identify the move towards an ‘amusement society’ where everyday life actively offers the opportunity to interpret and contest meanings as one sees fit. Selfhood then, represents a balance between spheres of domination and empowerment. The individual is dominated by the hegemonic inclinations of mass-mediated popular culture and yet individually empowered by the very goods and cultural productions that serve to sustain the legitimacy of such domination. Shopping, as Shields (1992c) later suggests, represents a form of solidarity, far from having a purely functional role, the shopping mall is essentially a public space where consumers can fulfil the communal needs that are not satisfied in other aspects of their lives. No attempt is made to validate this against the actual meaning that shopping malls have for the consumer. The ‘loose’ value-free theorising of postmodern discourse therefore underpins what amounts to a very generalised and unsubstantiated approach to the culture of consumption. Yet, this sort of lackadaisical approach to the role of consumption in contemporary society is justified by the philosophical foundations underpinning postmodernism which claim that there is no ‘absolute truth’ about such matters, only ‘representations’, thereby rendering empirical work redundant (Lash, 1990). This apparently gives authors

such as Langman (1992) and Maffesoli (1996), whose interesting though ultimately ungrounded work, *The Time of the Tribes*, I will discuss in detail in Chapter 10, a licence to foster theory-intensive preconceptions about the significance of consumption in contemporary society that remain empirically unsubstantiated and unvalidated. This is an important issue because, potentially, the psycho-social and ideological impact of consumption remains *unresearched*.

Featherstone's (1991) influential work is preferable in this regard, in at least as much as he calls for a conception of the cultural impact of consumption in everyday settings. His discussion of the aestheticization of everyday life, the process whereby standards of 'good style', 'good taste' and 'good design' have come to invade every aspect of our everyday life is a very useful one, but more often than not depends upon sober reflection rather than empirical insight. The predominance of theory over research is further evident in Featherstone's discussion of globalisation which clearly has significant implications as far as the construction of a global consumer culture is concerned. But again, such issues are inevitably limited by the fact that they fail to conceptualise effectively how it is, if at all, that globalisation underpins the actual *everyday* experience of contemporary society; in which case the academic labelling of such an experience as 'postmodern' would perhaps be justified.

The point here is that though we should not forget that postmodern debates have served to highlight the fact that, "Product image, style and design take over from modern metanarratives of conferring meaning" (Lyon, 1994, p. 61), the irony is that the actual construction of that meaning has not been addressed directly. In effect, the sociology of consumption has suffered through a postmodern emphasis on 'macro-cultural' issues. Though postmodernists have prioritised the cultural, they have only done so, by and large, from an over-arching conception of what constitutes culture, without consideration of the actual everyday



experiences in which culture is actively constructed. In this sense, as Gottdiener (1995) suggests,

“Postmodernist criticism should not be confined to textual analysis alone, or the critique of forms of representation alone, but should be an inquiry into the ways forms of representation structure everyday life. To forget everyday life and the users of culture is to neglect the formative aspects of culture itself.” (Gottdiener, 1995, p.31)

It should also be noted that the linguistic qualities of consumer goods are limited and what a semiotic approach tells us about the individual meanings actual consumers ascribe to the goods they purchase is negligible, in that they neglect personal meaning. Miller (1987) argues that the physicality of material artefacts makes them much harder than language to extricate from the specific social context in which they operate, thereby limiting the extent to which the language metaphor can be applied as a tool for the analysis of consumer culture. Campbell (1991) goes as far as to predict the declining influence of semiotic approaches to consumption,

“Although an approach of proven value, commodities are material objects and as such possess characteristics which are not consistent with their treatment as mere signs. What is more, whilst a semiotic approach successfully focuses attention on the meaning of consumer goods, services and practices, it tends to concentrate meaning in the context of communication and to analyze this at a collective or system level. Consequently there is a tendency to overlook the subjective meanings actually held by consumers themselves.” (p.69)

### ***Researching consumer culture***

What is significant about postmodern contributions to the sociology of consumption is that it has pushed cultural aspects of consumption towards the top of the sociological agenda. A corollary to this development, in terms of the nature of theoretical approaches to consumption, is the increasing recognition that consumption is of interest to sociologists in a purely cultural sense. Indeed, perhaps there is an argument for suggesting that consumer goods have become so prevalent in our society that their cultural significance has, in turn, multiplied to an extent that such goods have become a fundamental focus of people's everyday lives. The selling, promoting and consumption of goods has arguably become of more significance to our everyday life experience than those goods' actual production. Indeed, as Campbell (1987) notes, we live in a society where high levels of consumption are actually treated as indicative of social success and of personal happiness. Arguably, consumption has emerged as the over-riding life goal of modern western societies. Lyon (1994) therefore talks about the existence of not just a consumer *culture*, but multiple consumer *cultures*, in as much as consumption, and more specifically shopping, has emerged as a pleasurable leisure activity wherever you may live in the developed world.

As far as sociology as a discipline is concerned, McCracken (1990) argues that the study of the transformation to a consumer culture is, to a large extent, responsible for the foundations and development of the social sciences. And yet, as he points out, only recently have sociologists really began to focus on questions of style, taste, image and so on. Historically, the sociologist has become somewhat preoccupied with the superficial appeal of all-encompassing theories, in an attempt to explain the entirety of social structures. Only recently has the focus shifted somewhat towards more stylistic and cultural concerns, partly as a result of the influence of

postmodernism. For this it should be commended. But in the final analysis this approach carries with it certain dangers. Some of Jacoby's (1979) comments about the field of consumer research have a broad relevance here,

"Several of our most respected colleagues seem to belong to a sort of 'theory of the month' club which somehow requires that they burst forth with new theories periodically and rarely, if ever, bother to provide any original empirical data collected specifically in an attempt to support their theory. Perhaps those with a new theory or model should treat it like a new product: either stand behind it and give it the support it needs (i.e. test it and refine it as necessary) - or take the damn thing off the market!" (Jacoby, 1979, p.409)

Postmodernism may not boast the explanatory or empirical tools that can actually explain the impact of consumption on contemporary society.

### **Consumption as *psycho-social***

The debate over postmodernity is useful in as much as it develops the idea that consumption plays some form of role in constructing contemporary life experience. One of the arguments I will put forward, throughout this thesis, is that, in turn, some consideration of the question of how to incorporate the insights of alternative approaches and disciplines is equally important in the development of an effective understanding of the impact of consumption upon contemporary society. Consumption is psycho-social in that it cannot be effectively understood without consideration of both structural and agentic factors. By briefly considering the problems inherent in two further approaches to the question of consumption, namely Pirjo Laaksonen's (1994) *Consumer Involvement* and Susan Willis' (1991) *A Primer for Daily Life*, I will highlight the

need for research to address consumption as a psycho-social phenomena in cultural contexts.

In adopting a cognitive angle on consumption, Laaksonen (1994) focuses on consumer involvement, “the degree to which the product-related knowledge structure is embedded in a higher order structure of consumption values” (p.167). Her work therefore considers how far consumers are involved in the decisions they make on purchases. Laaksonen attempts to address this question in the context of a series of in-depth interviews with consumers focusing on different consumer products. Much to her credit, Laaksonen begins to address the meanings which consumers have for the goods that they consume. Yet, despite focusing on consumer meanings her work fails to contextualise such meanings effectively. Though she is at pains to acknowledge the significance of the cultural context of consumption Laaksonen, in fact, draws a largely asocial, acultural, vision of consumption. In effect, despite the fact that Laaksonen highlights the dynamic cultural context of consumer involvement, no effort is made to thoroughly address that context on the empirical platform that she presents. The fact that Laaksonen’s (1996) work is rooted in a desire to establish an understanding of ‘product-knowledge structures’ determines that any conception of the cultural context in which such structures are established is lost amidst underlying disciplinary predispositions.

A similar criticism could be levelled at Susan Willis’ (1991) book *A Primer for Daily Life*. Willis’ work can be commended for the effort on her part to prioritise the notion of ‘everyday life’ as a focus for the impact of the commodity in modern culture, but such an analysis is inherently limited. Although her discussion, which is most memorable for it’s analysis of the relationship between gender and the commodity, is undoubtedly insightful, it suffers from an inability to conceptualise such experiences in terms of the meanings they have for the

consumers concerned. It is all well and good to discuss the impact of everyday forms of consumption such as Barbie dolls, Disneyland and Classic Coke, but to do so whilst signposting the authenticity of a thorough understanding of everyday life, without recourse to what the 'everyday' means to the consumers concerned, is essentially misleading. In effect, the conception of the commodity that underlies Willis' (1991) analysis is dependant upon a critical conception of consumer practices that do not account enough for consumer involvement.

These two approaches to consumption suffer from omitting aspects of the consumption experience that appear to be perceived as being alien disciplinary territory; issues that are perceived as being 'owned' by one discipline and that subsequently cannot possibly be explored by another. The disciplinary approach that each author adopts therefore predisposes their analyses to be of limited value. Though this thesis primarily adopts a sociological focus, I will argue that this focus is inevitably fuzzy, unless some of the contributions of other disciplinary insights are applied, in tandem with some of the raw ideas discussed earlier in the context of postmodernism. It may then be possible to address the psycho-social impact of consumption in routine cultural settings.

The above arguments reinforce the fact that if it is true that the effects of socio-economic change, upon the individual life experience, have become so profound that individual-centred identities have become the norm, in turn, virtually wiping out the effective role for group life in identity constructions, then the role of consumption has to become a serious *psycho-social* consideration. Consumption is an important focus for social scientific research, most especially because it engenders a variety of psychological, as well sociological, concerns. More specifically, consumption represents what Holland (1977) describes as a 'mediation phenomena', an important focus for debates that apparently fall in the disciplinary void between sociology and psychology. Yet as a direct result of

the complexity of its psychological and sociological impact in cultural contexts, this focus has been lost amidst the vagaries of disciplinary tradition (see Archibald, 1976).

Regardless of the best way in which to approach these issues, the question I want to consider here, is how far, in light of developments in the economy, have material possessions come to provide a readily available source from which the individual can create his or her own identity. The increasingly important role of consumption in cultural life is also discussed by McCracken (1985) who agrees that consumption increasingly became a matter for the individual rather than the family, class or local corporation. Indeed, as Ferguson (1992) points out, as selfhood came to be conceptualised as individuated personal identity, consumption came to provide a context; a medium through which the self could be expressed. Thus, goods increasingly became a means for self-expression and cultural experimentation, so that ultimately, "Consumption became an idiom for the expression and invention of new social and cultural orders" (McCracken, 1985,p.152). In effect, as Robins (1994) argues, "We must acknowledge how much consumption is linked to the protection of the emotional and bodily self" (p. 455). The work of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) who conducted an interview-based study of personally cherished possessions, could provide a benchmark in this respect, in that their ethnographic approach to consumer meanings allowed them to identify how it is that objects are used as both signs of self, strengtheners of social relationships and mediators of cultural principles. Indeed, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) argue,

"despite the importance of objects, little is known about the reasons for attachment to them, about the ways in which they become incorporated in the goals and in the actual experiences of persons." (p. x)

What is important, in this respect, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton note, is that consumer goods are not simply tools for making life easier or more comfortable. They actively embody personal goals, and arguably reflect cultural identities. The material environment is not neutral, as such, but provides symbolic meanings which, arguably, go some way to giving order and purpose to our everyday lives.

In effect, we live in a society where what we consume and how, why and where we consume it, has a key role to play in constructing our everyday life experience. In this sense, Featherstone (1991) points out that the challenge for the sociologist is to account for these emergent tendencies in a detached objective manner which avoids the temptation to either deplore the massifying tendencies of consumer culture, or alternatively to blindly celebrate the unadulterated pleasures and disorders that that culture offers. Consumption is an important topic for sociological *research*, and I use that word advisedly, precisely because it can attract such complex and diverse interpretations. In the final analysis it is up to the sociologist to rise above such complexity by attempting to establish an empirically grounded and situated sociology of consumption. I will consider how this project might begin to develop, in Chapters 6 and 10. In the meantime, this thesis will attempt to make the first conceptual steps along what is a long and winding road.

## Chapter 3

### Identity

Despite the proliferation of research into the social scientific study of consumption in recent years, the relationship between consumption and identity remains largely uncharted, or at least unresolved, territory. This can be explained, in the first instance, by the fact that identity itself is a particularly problematic concept to deal with, both in terms of definition and practical application. There is no single definition of identity that we can call upon to address any relationship it might have with contemporary consumption patterns. More often than not the concept is used indiscriminately with very little conception of its theoretical accuracy or empirical validity. In this chapter, I intend to clarify the notion of identity by discussing four major theoretical approaches: those of Erik Erikson, the symbolic interactionists, the social identity theorists, and finally approaches associated with the debate over postmodernity. I will argue that in tandem, aspects of each of these approaches can serve to enlighten the *psycho-social* understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity.

#### Theorising Identity

The primary problem with the question of identity is the fact that it is such an elusive concept and as such does not render itself to straightforward measurement or analysis. Indeed,

"The fact that the concept, of identity... is dependent upon its theoretical context for its definition leads to further difficulties. It means the same term can be used by two different theorists who define it in totally



different ways. Making direct comparisons across theories consequently has nightmare qualities."(Breakwell, 1983, p.4)

Breakwell (1986) goes as far as to suggest that theorising about identity is tantamount to traversing a battlefield. This is not as much of an exaggeration as it might at first appear. An initial confusion is caused by the interchangeability of terms such as self-concept, personality, self-esteem and identity. The waters are further muddied by theorists who discuss what on the surface appear to be the same concepts, but from different theoretical perspectives. A particularly damaging tendency is to use identity as a substitute word for the self. As a mode of analysis the self-concept suffers from an over-individualistic bias, as Stone (1962) points out, and it is this sort of limitation that the study of identity is actively seeking to address.

Most damaging then, is the tendency to use identity as a versatile catch-all term that can be applied to any discussion of the experience of modern life without recourse to the meaning of the concept itself. At the other extreme, it could be argued that the notion of identity is under-utilised as a focus for research, in the sense that whilst psychologists often disregard the concept of identity, because of the sense in which it is conceived as being socially bestowed, on the other hand sociologists are often wary of the term because of its psychological connotations. The irony then is that identity (much like consumption), appears to fall between disciplinary stools. My contention, however, is that the notion of identity provides some key theoretical pointers from which both sociologists and psychologists can benefit, not least in context of an analysis of the significance of consumption in the experience of modern societies.

The intention of this chapter is therefore to make some sense of the battlefield of competing ideas that appears to characterise debates over identity construction.

The first stage in this process involves a consideration of the work of arguably one of the most significant single theorists on the question of identity: Erik Erikson.

### **Erik Erikson**

As far as sociology is concerned, an inability to conceptualise identity formation effectively is a direct consequence of not having the suitable theoretical apparatus to do so. This stems, at least partly, from the disciplinary prejudices that I mentioned above. And yet there is, in fact, an argument, as Stevens (1983) points out in his discussion of Erik Erikson's (1968) work on psychosocial identity that, "The nature of a society will be reflected in the psychological problems characteristically experienced by members of that society" (p.59). As such, Erikson (1968) suggests that whilst in the period during which Sigmund Freud was elaborating his theories, inhibition and repression were highly significant, the complex and rootless nature of society has led to a shift in emphasis. In effect, then, the psychological experience of an individual is tied up in social structures. Psychological problems occur when the individual is insufficiently prepared to cope with society's changing demands. However, generally speaking, as Elliott (1994) points out, Erikson (1968) sees society as being essentially beneficial for self-definition, in that it, "provides the ideological matrix of meanings for new definitions of identity" (Elliott, 1994, p.66).

Erik Erikson (1968) continues to be an influential theorist of identity in psychological quarters. Working within the Freudian tradition he presents a much needed social dimension to the psychological impact of identity formation. He sees the individual's development as occurring within a social context where societal expectations require a selection from available choices, the individual being very much dependant upon confirmation of the validity of such choices and thus community acceptance. As such, society must provide the opportunity

for ego autonomy, that is a degree of independence to allow the individual to make appropriate life choices, alongside the opportunity for experimentation (Adams, 1992). Erikson's (1968) notion of identity is therefore essentially psycho-social, in that he feels that identity can only be studied if viewed from two perspectives, namely that of the society and the individual personality, and in relation to *each other* (Stevens, 1983).

Erikson (1968) presents an account of the 'Eight ages of man' [*sic*] in which he charts the human life cycle in terms of eight phases of ego development, a process whereby individual maturation depends upon a progressive shifts in ego strength. Within this developmental theory Erikson (1968) identifies three processes that in combination build an individual's identity; introjection; identification; and identity formation. During childhood the infant internalises the injunctions and demands of significant others, such as parents, establishing inner representations of them. Growing older, he or she gradually identifies with people who assume significance in the life experience. Identity formation comes into play when the usefulness of this process of identification ends. That is, the individual absorbs selected childhood identifications as part of a new configuration, which is itself dependent upon how society itself identifies the young person concerned (Erikson, 1968). As such, the individual's experience of society and sub-groupings of that society serve to underpin the individual's expanding self-awareness, thereby encouraging a more conscious exploration of self (Stevens, 1983). As far as Erikson (1983) is concerned then, adolescence represents an especially critical period for the formation of an individual's identity. Indeed, Erikson (1968) describes adolescence as,

"that period of the life cycle when each youth must forge for himself [*sic*] some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his childhood and the hopes of his anticipated

adulthood; he must select some meaningful resemblance between what he has come to see in himself and what his sharpened awareness tells him others judge and expect him to be." (p.159)

In effect, Erikson argues that the choices made during adolescence have a fundamental role to play in providing a framework for the resolution of future dilemmas. What is therefore critical about adolescence, as Stevens (1983) points out, is this dimension of choice. Identity formation is a process of exploration and experimentation. As such, Erikson (1968) discusses the social role of what he describes as a psychosocial moratorium. That is, the process by which society creates a period between the end of childhood and the adoption of a coherent identity, whereby youth are allowed psychological space in which they can work through their identity problems without family interference, and unconstrained by adult work roles. In effect, young people are able to experiment with their identities, consolidating their place in society as they do so.

The extent to which Erikson's work represents an effective interpretation of identity formation in a so-called postmodern world can only be a matter for debate. On the face of it Erikson's psycho-social approach to this topic seems to provide a potentially effective means of bridging the gap between sociology and psychology, in an analysis of the relationship between consumption and identity. Despite any reservations one might have for a developmental model, which tends to have an inherent distaste for individual agency, and despite the general confusion in Erikson's (1968) work as to whether he is referring to a structure or a process, a subjective experience or an unconscious entity, there can be no doubt that Erikson (1968) has left an invaluable legacy to identity theorists.

There is an argument, however, for suggesting that Erikson's theories are constrained by the conception of social change that he adopts. This point is most

lucidly expressed by Logan (1983) who points out that Erikson's (1968) work is very much a product of the 1960s. What Logan (1983) argues is that modern society has undergone a fundamental change in lifestyle orientation that undermines the premises which structure Erikson's theory. In particular, a shift from a lifestyle dominated by production to one dominated by consumption and, in turn, the move away from living for the future towards living for the present tends to weaken the sense of historical continuity that is essential to Erikson's work. In effect, though Erikson acknowledges the impact of social change, he failed to foresee the rapidity and therefore potential impact such change could have upon young people's identities. Logan (1983) goes as far as to argue that what he describes as an "Existential Identity" has come to replace the "Instrumental Identity" which underpinned Erikson's theory of identity.

"Rather than being experienced as a builder and maker, the self has begun to be experienced as on the receiving end of experience and the world; in the terms used to describes changing life-styles, self-as-consumer has begun to replace self-as-producer." (Logan, 1983, p.945)

In respect of the relationship between the development of capitalism and identity Elliott (1994) actually goes as far as to criticise Erikson (1968) for "underwriting the cultural values of late capitalism"(p.67). Arguing that Erikson's work is fraught with conceptual difficulties and ideological blind spots, he suggests that Erikson's concept of identity is premised on a belief that there is a fundamental essence of selfhood, something that I will suggest later, is seriously questioned by contemporary thinkers. From this perspective Erikson's work is seen to imply that modern social conditions provide an all-inclusive framework for affirmative identity. Erikson presents society in an essentially positive light, free from the restrictions of power and force which, in fact, could, arguably, be said to permeate and marginalise social relations (Elliot, 1994). But, putting to one side

Elliot's (1994) doubts about the validity of a cultural conception of psychoanalysis, there can be no doubt that Erikson's (1968) theoretical work has struggled to keep pace with the impact of social change, precisely because such change is so rapid. Analytically then, Erikson's theory is limited. It's analysis of identity formation and particularly the youth experience is too prescriptive and inflexible in as much as it fails to take into consideration the fragmented nature of modern life.

In this context, it could be argued that the highly influential nature of Erikson's work and the fact that such work underestimates the complexities of the cultural experience has held back the study of identity. Psychological research has often been so preoccupied with developing Erikson's ideas (see Adams et al., 1992; Rosenthal et al., 1981) that advances beyond the application of Erikson's ideas have been few and far between. The Adams (1992) collection is a particularly useful case in point. Though acknowledging that Erikson's theoretical writings have been broadened out empirically in the form of innovations by authors such as Marcia (1980), little concerted effort is made to discuss the limitations of Erikson's work. The apparent dependency of approaches to identity on Erikson's (1968) work is a good illustration of how psychology has systematically failed to come to terms with the implications of socio-economic change. Despite such limitations, it does not necessarily follow that Erikson's insights should not have an invaluable contribution to make in developing theoretical conceptions of identity; his focus on the question of identity being especially important.

### **Symbolic interactionism**

The symbolic interactionists have had an equally significant, and arguably controversial, contribution to make to social scientific conceptions of identity. Usually traced back to the work of George Herbert Mead (1934), symbolic interactionists argue that in order to understand a person we need to understand

their unique perspective on life. In this respect, a sense of identity stems from the human ability for self-reflexivity (Dittmar, 1992). As such, symbolic interactionists focus on the nature of interaction, the dynamic social activities that take place between people, and the ways in which that interaction changes society. In this sense, Plummer (1975), who studied homosexuality and sexual stigma, in what represents one of the most significant efforts to apply interactionist thought to a research setting, identifies three main foci of symbolic interactionism,

“These suggest the world may be seen as a subjective reality, as a process and as interactive. The first directs the student to study the ‘inner’ side of life, to look at meanings and to analyse the ways in which the world is socially constructed. The second directs him [*sic*] to study the emergent and constantly changing nature of social life. While the third suggests that the individual is best constantly studied in conjunction with some significant others, or in collective action.” (p. 11)

From this point of view human beings do not simply respond to their world, but they define it and interpret it, as Charon (1985) notes. Thus, human beings are seen to be constantly acting in relation to each other, and as such, communicate symbolically in almost everything they do. Society, it is argued, is made up of individuals working things out in relation to one another. Society is therefore the construct of a highly interactive process, a process rooted in the relationship between structure and agency,

“In truth society does “make us” as we interact with others. But with what society provides - symbols, self, mind, role taking ability - we turn around and make society.” (Charon, 1985, p. 173)

Society, in effect, becomes possible in as much as people come to share perspectives which serve to underpin the complexities of society. Such complexities are only possible, in as much as every individual has general attitudes by which he or she can monitor him or herself. Identity is therefore seen by symbolic interactionists, as very much a process of mutual labelling. The way we are labelled by others, namely by our reference groups and by significant others in our lives, becomes central to how we see ourselves, as interaction confirms those identities time and time again. Interaction plays a key role in as much as it is a two-way process. We learn from others who we are, we announce to our self in communication who we are, but we also announce to those we interact with who we are (Stone, 1962).

Various authors have acknowledged, however briefly, the relevance that this sort of approach might have for an understanding of the relationship between identity and consumption (eg. Rochberg-Halton, 1984; Solomon, 1983; Dittmar, 1992). In particular, Dittmar (1992) discusses the role of subjective social reality; that is the process by which the objective world (which the individual experiences outside him or her self, alongside their symbolic social reality, and which, in turn, incorporates forms of symbolic expression such as language, non-verbal behavioural and material objects) is internalised, in the form of an individual's awareness and understanding. From this point of view, individuals are seen to integrate both objective and symbolic aspects of material objects in constructing their own representations, and thereby regard such objects as symbols of identity; symbols to be negotiated in the context of social interaction.

The symbolic interactionist approach to identity has been subject to extensive criticism. In general, symbolic interactionists are often criticised for being unscientific, notably in the form of criticism of the vague nature in which they conceptualise the notions that they discuss. It is therefore argued that they



provide a very limited basis for theory and research which is difficult to replicate or operationalise (Ritzer, 1992). More significantly perhaps, in the context of this research, they are often condemned for making, what Ritzer (1992) describes as, a “fetish” out of everyday life. That is for being over-concerned with the transient and the fleeting; with the immediacy of everyday life. Indeed, there is a strong argument for suggesting that symbolic interactionism pays insufficient attention to the impact of structure,

“It is the aggregate outcomes that form the linkages among episodes of interaction that are the concern of sociology qua sociology... The concept of social structure is necessary to deal with the incredible density and complexity of relations through which episodes of interaction are interconnected.” (Weinstein and Tanur, 1976, p. 106)

At the other end of the spectrum authors such as Meltzer et al. (1975) criticise the symbolic interactionists for their neglect of human emotion, needs, and aspirations. Symbolic interactionists are said to have a far too rational conception of identity, in that they do not account for irrational human behaviour.

As an approach that appears to attempt, at least partially, to integrate sociological and psychological concerns, symbolic interactionism is heartily criticised from both directions (Layder, 1994). In the final analysis, as Layder (1994) goes on to note, the major weakness of symbolic interactionism is the fact that it fails to construct any real connection between face-to-face interaction and broader structural concerns which inevitably influence such interaction. As I will go on to argue, what symbolic interactionists do tell us about interaction is, however, of significance to a psycho-social conception of identity, in as much as identity is a cultural and *interactive* construction.

## **Social identity theory**

The third of the four theoretical approaches to identity which I want to discuss, and one which appears to have much in common with the work of the symbolic interactionists is social identity theory. Generally associated with the work of Tajfel (1978) and Turner (1991), social identity theory works on the premise that a social category into which an individual falls, and to which he or she feels he or she belongs, provides a definition of who that individual is in terms of the defining characteristics of that category. Such a category might refer to support of a football club, membership of a youth culture, or a peer group, for example. Each individual is therefore seen to have a variety of such discrete category memberships, each of which varies in importance as far as constructing an individual's identity is concerned. These social categories are constituted in the individual's mind as a social identity that prescribes how he or she should behave in a social situation as a member of that group (Hogg et al., 1995). In turn, the self-evaluative nature of social identities means that individuals adopt behavioural strategies that maintain pre-conceived in-group/out-group comparisons. In-group similarities and out-group differences are exaggerated as a means of distinguishing between category members and non-members (Dittmar, 1992). Thus, as Hogg et al. (1995) note intergroup boundaries are sharpened by a process of categorization which constructs group-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions; thereby helping to assign individuals to relevant categories.

Self-categorization theory, which is most closely associated with the work of Turner (1991), extends this aspect of social identity theory in as much as it argues that categorizations of self and others into groups defines people's social identities; simultaneously accentuating their perceived similarity to people's cognitive representation of the defining features of the in-group,

“People are essentially “depersonalized”: they are perceived as, are reacted to, and act as embodiments of the relevant in-group prototype rather than as unique individuals... Through depersonalization, self-categorization effectively brings self-perception and behavior into line with the contextually relevant in-group prototype, and thus transforms individuals into group members and individuality into group behavior.” (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 261)

In this sense the notion of depersonalization does not have negative connotations, referring to a contextual change in the level of identity, as opposed to an actual loss of identity. The point is that members of the same social group share subjective representations in social contexts. Thus, perceptions, feelings and actions are depersonalized in favour of the contextually relevant in-group representation. This representation provides a sense of ‘positive distinctiveness’ (Tajfel, 1978). What Tajfel (1981) offers here then, is social-psychological determinism, in that he argues that the processes of individual cognition interact with processes of social influence, which therefore establish dominant ideologies, in turn producing personal beliefs and values (see Breakwell, 1986).

Such questions have important implications in the context of consumption (see Dittmar, 1992). Potentially, consumer goods are strong indicators of group allegiance, membership and distinctiveness. As such, Dittmar (1992) discusses categorical differentiation, the way in which people exaggerate differences between groups and minimise differences between individuals in the same group. Therefore, as Wilder (1981) demonstrates people view individuals in a very simplified stereotypical fashion when those people belong to a group different to their own. There exists what Dittmar (1992) calls a “uniformity-variability of group images” (p.147), in which such over-simplifications act in direct contrast to the varied and complex images people have about their own in-

group. The question here centres on the role which consumption plays in the construction of such images. In particular, what implications do the salience of group images have for the goods that a consumer chooses to purchase, the meanings he or she invests in such goods; and, in turn, what implication do such goods have for the construction of a viable identity?

The advantages and disadvantages of social identity theory are the subject of considerable debate. Hogg et al. (1995) argue that it has some advantages over the identity theory presented by the symbolic interactionists in that it amounts to a more detailed specification of sociocognitive processes. In this sense it can also be commended for attempting to combine sociological and psychological conceptions of group contexts; an associated problem, being, however, that despite its theoretical underpinnings research tends to follow a characteristically psychological route. As such, social identity theory has been criticised for amounting to psychological reductionism (Condor, 1990). On the other hand, it could be argued that social identity theory should be commended for attempting to understand the impact of a person's self-mediated position in the social world actively on social behaviour. The fact is, however, that such an analysis focuses on the relationship between the individual and the group which is something altogether different from the relationship between the individual and society. In this sense Hogg et al. (1995) ask a telling question,

"What are the differences between identities that arise from behavioral roles within groups, identities that arise from group membership, and identities arise from membership in large-scale social categories?" (p. 267)

The role which consumption plays in constructing such identities is a fascinating issue which cannot be resolved by social identity theory alone. I will now go on

to consider how postmodern contributions to the debate can shed some light upon such debates.

### **Identity in a 'postmodern' world**

The question of identity has emerged as a major bone of contention within debates over postmodernism. Though there are clearly a wide variety of approaches to identity, analogous to such a debate, Kellner's (1992) discussion of the ways in which identity formation appears, historically, to have altered, is particularly pertinent here. He argues that in traditional societies identity was rooted in predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths and religion which circumscribed the individual's experience of the world. In pre-modern societies identity construction was apparently relatively straightforward, based very much upon the kinship group into which you were born.

However, with the onset of modernity, identity arguably becomes far more mobile and reflexive. Mutual recognition and self-validation become increasingly important and yet identity is still relatively fixed in as much as it still dependant on a fixed set of roles and norms. That is, as Kellner (1992) argues, identities are "still relatively circumscribed, fixed, and limited, though the boundaries of possible identities, of new identities, are continually expanding" (p.140). As such, modern identities are increasingly subject to choice and therefore are potentially problematic and anxiety-provoking. Modern identities are essentially based on diversity of secondary sources of identity and, in turn, on ensuring that such diversities are used in the right fashion in order to construct a coherent sense of self.

Whilst modernity tends to begin to erode the sense of stability inherent in a person's identity, theorists of the postmodern see identities as becoming increasingly fragmented, so much so, as Kellner (1992) points out, that the very

notion of identity becomes problematized. From this point of view, in contemporary society, identity has become reconstructed and redefined, but has done so in the shadow of a more free-floating experience. Some authors go as far as to suggest that the mass-mediated culture that we now live in it becomes supposedly impossible to maintain a subjective sense of identity. In effect the self has been decentred and schizophrenic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977), a mere constellation of depthless fragmented experience. In this context how can anyone feel alienated, when there is no real human essence from which to be alienated?

Indeed, as far as the study of identity is concerned the first question to ask, in the context of Kellner's (1992) work, is how far any form of stable identity is possible in the current cultural climate. What we can identify is a move away from a primarily group-centred identity, in that formerly, as Dittmar (1992) suggests, identity was largely conferred on the individual through primary social ties, towards an identity that can barely be maintained amidst a culture of fragmentary individualism. The only thing stable about postmodern identity is its instability. Indeed, many theorists go as far as to discuss 'the death of the subject', that is the notion that in a postmodern society there can be no such thing as a unified, reified and essentialized subject (Jameson, 1984; Kvale, 1992). This question is further developed by Rorty (1986) who sees the postmodern self as a bundle of 'quasi-selves', what Featherstone (1995) in turn, describes as "a random and contingent assemblage of experiences" (p. 45). There is, in fact, no underlying human essence behind the diversity of our social roles. The implication here seems to be that far from social change underpinning identity formation it actually undermines it.

What I am referring to here then is the suggestion that was made in Chapter 2 that the contemporary life experience is essentially fragmented. However, as Featherstone (1991) notes, this fragmentation can be seen as liberating, in that it

provides the individual with all sorts of opportunities for personal innovation. In this sense, Featherstone (1991) suggests that what we might be experiencing is not necessarily a total absence of controls, but a deeper integrative principle. In essence, 'rules of *disorder*' are operating which allow more easily controlled swings between order and disorder; swings which were formally threatening to the construction of a consistent identity.

Whether or not we can accept the entirety of historical overviews such as that of Kellner (1992) or Featherstone (1991) is a matter for continued debate. What can be accepted is that the decline of traditional family and kinship bonds and collective solidarities, and the subsequent implications for the role of consumption in contemporary society, is both well documented and significant (see Baethge, 1985; Dittmar, 1991; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; and Langman, 1992). The breakdown of stable social networks are seen to have serious implications for identity formation in that the individual and more specifically the consumer, is left to construct such an identity in an increasingly fragmented world within which operate a plurality of life experiences. Whether or not we can comfortably describe such experiences as postmodern, as such, is another matter entirely.

A further argument, is that put forward by Featherstone (1991), who suggests that a postmodern world offers the prospect of the end of a social game, in which cultural goods (and thus consumer goods) are used as a means of establishing boundaries and building bridges between people. In a postmodern world consumer goods can then, be actively used as a means of pulling *down* all such pretension to this sort of a social world. In a culturally de-classified world consumption has the potential to be liberating in that it actively contributes to the construction of a multi-centred identity. This is a question I will consider further in the consideration of my empirical data which I will present in Chapters 6 to 9.

Whatever role consumption plays in constructing people's identities, the problem here seems to be that approaches dealing with identity, within the broad debate surrounding postmodernism, tend to be over-dependant upon theory. I will illustrate this point with a very brief consideration of the work of three particular authors whose work is discussed by Warde (1994a, 1994b); namely Beck (1992), Bauman (1989, 1996) and Giddens (1991). The contributions of the above three authors, are undoubtedly of theoretical interest, but are not applied sufficiently to the everyday experience of the real world.

As Warde (1994a) points out, Ulrich Beck (1992) recognises an ever-intensifying move towards individualization as part of a process of reflexive modernisation, a process whereby individuals "become the agents of their own livelihood mediated by the market" (Beck, 1992, p.130). As such,

"...individualization is not based on the on the free decision of individuals. To use Sartre's term, people are condemned to individualization. Individualization is a compulsion, but a compulsion for the manufacture, self-design and self-staging of not just one's own biography but also its commitments and networks as preferences and life phases change." (Beck et al., 1994, p.14)

The traditional support mechanisms associated with modernity, namely social class and family are therefore replaced by secondary ties such as fashions, economic cycles, and markets, which in turn undermine that individual's degree of control (Beck, 1992). People are "delivered over" to an external control and standardisation, notably in the form of mass consumption, that was unheard of in previous societies. As far as Beck (1992) is concerned then, the self-reflexive individual is subject to a far riskier image-centred life experience, where social



and personal identity's can potentially be characterised in Warde's (1994b) words by "personal ontological insecurity in everyday life" (p.879).

An equally influential approach to consumption and identity formation in contemporary society is that of Anthony Giddens, whose work I will also discuss in Chapter 5 in the context of the structure and agency debate. In particular, Giddens (Beck et al., 1994) talks about the emergence of a post-traditional society, an experimental modernity which incorporates a grand experiment which is our own doing, as human agents, and yet simultaneously beyond our control. Noting the diversity of choice in modern societies, and the lack of any help in making such choices Giddens (1991), as Warde (1994a) points out, prioritises the notion of lifestyle, in that "Market-governed freedom of choice becomes an enveloping framework of self-expression" (Giddens, 1991, p.198). As such, consumption plays an important role in an individual's identity, but not as risk-inducing a role as is suggested in Beck's work.

Zygmunt Bauman (1988) sees identity formation in a postmodern world as being very much free-floating, and as being in a state of potential, if not actual, change, as Bock (1993) notes. In his work *Freedom* (1988) Bauman, as Warde (1994a) points out, discusses the link between consumption and liberty. Noting the decline of traditional ties, Bauman acknowledges the fact that individuality becomes a problem in that the individual is under-socialised in the sense that there are no universal guidelines to abide by, and over-socialised, in that interventions on the part of other people, as well as explicit social regulations are inevitable as a result (see Warde, 1994a). Individuals are therefore left to construct their own identities; consumption playing an important part in this process in that it incorporates the potentially stressful experience of being able to choose, and to choose 'correctly.'

More recently, Bauman (1996) has argued that whilst the modern 'problem of identity' was how to construct a stable identity, the postmodern 'problem of identity' resides in the need to actively avoid fixation in order to keep the individual's options open as much as possible. In effect, whilst in modernity the individual was concerned with durability; in postmodernity he or she actively avoids commitment,

"And so the snag is no longer how to discover, invent, construct, assemble (even buy) an identity, but how to prevent it from sticking. Well constructed and durable identity turns from an asset into a liability. The hub of postmodern strategy is not identity building, but avoidance of fixation." (Bauman, 1996, p. 24)

Bauman therefore talks about a culture in which gratification cannot be delayed. Any need that the individual feels that he or she must have, must be satisfied immediately, in the sense that the gratification that the individual seeks today may not still be gratifying tomorrow. The individual does not *want* stability in his or her life and as such, the identity he or she seeks is a flexible and liberating one. The role of stability in young people's lives is an issue I will return throughout the course of this thesis.

Warde (1994a) argues that all three authors tend to exaggerate the extent to which consumption plays an important role in the construction of identities in contemporary society. In particular, Warde (1994b) disputes the degree to which consumption represents a source of anxiety, free of compensatory mechanisms by which consumer choice is made. As such,

"There is reason for doubting that the pursuit of self-identity is the paramount goal of consumption. Almost all recent accounts of

consumption exaggerate the part that establishing self-identity plays in the activity. Doubtless, this is an important aspect of consumption, but exactly how important in relation to other purposes remains unclear." (Warde, 1994b, p.891)

Though I would accept that social theorists tend to exaggerate the role self-identity plays in the construction of identity, I would also argue that this exaggeration emanates firstly from the tendency to over-theorise consumption and, secondly, from the tendency to see the consumption/identity relationship more in terms of the role identity has in the context of consumption, than the role consumption has in the context of identity. Warde's criticisms of the above three authors may or may not be valid. But such validity can only be determined in the context of empirical work which attempts to address these issues. The fact that the social sciences remain unclear as to the relationship between consumption and identity is inevitable precisely because an effective means of addressing that relationship has simply not been established. I will now begin an attempt to do so, by constructing a working definition of what constitutes 'identity'.

### **Conceptualising identity**

What is identity? Despite, the insights provided by the above four approaches to the identity question, no single definition of identity easily comes to hand. But the question remains. The initial impression might be that the above four approaches highlight the diversity of opinions upon the debate in question. I would, however, suggest that the brief discussion of those approaches actually highlights certain key issues that should be prioritised in the social scientific approach to the relationship between consumption and identity. It is these issues to which I will now turn:

1) Identity is neither a purely psychological or sociological phenomena, but is *psycho-social*. The individual-society divide needs to be bridged, in as far as it hinders an adequate conceptualisation of identity (see Henriques et al., 1984). The micro-experiences of individual's are tied up, as Erikson (1968) notes, in social structures. In as much as identities are dependant upon this inter-relationship, they are essentially dynamic.

2) As such, the construction of identities is intimately bound up with the everyday experience of social change. In an increasingly fragmented world an identity constructed through the interaction between the individual and society will mirror micro-expressions of broad social change. Though such fragmentation tends to be exaggerated in the context of postmodernism, there do appear to be some historical grounds for arguing that identities are less dependant upon more traditional ties than has been the case in the past. In effect, the boundaries within which identities are constructed have been expanded.

3) Youth is a period of exploration and experimentation within which young people seek individual autonomy and as such, as Erikson (1968) notes, the choices young people make during this period appear to have important implications for the construction of their identities. It is in this respect that the individual's perspective is a particularly important indicator of what constitutes identity construction. How a young person sees him or her self and how significant others see him or her is therefore plays a critical part in this process. Youth, in effect, provides a psycho-social moratorium within which the individual can find his or her psycho-social feet.

4) How does the individual find his or her psycho-social feet? Largely, as symbolic interactionists would argue, within their immediate social situation.

The social world is an interactive world, and individuals construct their identities in collective contexts. How individuals label each other in this context therefore plays a significant role, as does the degree of choice which the individual asserts in relation to the immediate social pressures on his or her experience. Such pressures are most visibly expressed, as social identity theorists would argue, in the context of differentiations between in- and out-groups which serve to structure de-personalised group identities. It should also be noted that both symbolic interactionists and social identity theorists tend to present a one-dimensional view of identity construction. That is, they neglect to analyse how it is that the social becomes cultural. The abstract ways in which such discourse conceive of identity tends to neglect cultural interpretations of social experience.

5) Bearing in mind the apparently ubiquitous nature of consumption and consumer lifestyles, there might well therefore be an argument for suggesting that, potentially, consumption may, indeed, have some active role to play in the cultural construction of identities. As such, symbolic interactionists talk about “social objects” as a means of constructing meaning during the course of interaction. Young people might well be argued to construct socially derived definitions and responses to consumer goods, notably those that reflect conceptualisations of what constitutes the in group, that might, in turn, impart some influence on the cultural construction of identities. In this sense identity construction is an active creative process. However, it is also important not to neglect the structural and ideological influences that still operate as part of this process, an issue that is all too often neglected by the four major approaches I discuss above.

Taken together, the above points all serve to illuminate the *context* in which identities are constructed. However, it is simply not possible to construct a

satisfactory definition of what constitutes 'identity' at this stage, in light of the complexities that are clearly engendered in the debate over the identity question as a whole. The main thing to remember is that identities are not merely social. They are not structurally ordained, but are the product of the cultural construction of norms and values, in which material goods potentially play a part. What I will suggest here is that a brief consideration of some of the key issues relating to the identity question, highlight the fact that whilst identity is essentially a cultural construction, consumption is essentially a cultural resource, and that in this sense any subsequent relationship is worth exploring. Indeed, this point appears to be substantiated by some of the theoretical insights discussed above, none of which, alone, can provide an adequate explanation of identity construction in the late twentieth century western world. However, all four approaches have useful things to say about the essence of the notion of identity lying in its *cultural* context. Far from being a passive recipient of inputs as Breakwell (1986) notes, the individual is agentic; that is, he or she applies meanings to the social processes he or she experiences. The degree of agency with which an individual interprets his or her everyday life, has, however, to be balanced against the role of structures in providing the foundations upon which such experiences are laid. This is expressed no better than in the work of Erikson (1968) who identifies, "a process "located" in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (p.22).

In this sense identity should not only be seen as cultural, but equally importantly as *psycho-social*. What the notion of identity refers to is the intersection between the individual's psychology and his or her social and cultural experience. Arguably, consumption provides the arena within which such an intersection is most readily expressed.

In this context, there is a strong argument for suggesting that postmodern theorists tend to exaggerate the fragmentary schizophrenic nature of the postmodern subject thereby misunderstanding the relationship between social change, interaction, and everyday life. In this respect Lather's (1992) arguments are convincing, in that he identifies,

"a provisional, contingent, strategic, constructed subject which, while intelligible, is not essentialized... Decentering is not so much the elimination of the subject as it is the multi-centredness of action, a reconceptualization of agency from subject-centred agency to the plurality and agency of meaning." (p.103).

The suggestion here is that identities are multi-centred, but are still dependant upon an intelligible subject, capable of constructing his or her own meanings. There is no doubt that identity construction is a highly complex process in contemporary society, but such complexity should not necessarily lead us into the conclusion that identity has been completely de-centred. Indeed, I will conclude this section by quoting Josselson who argues that identity amounts to the,

"dynamic fitting together of parts of the personality with the reality of the social world so that a person has a sense of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world." (Josselson, 1987, pp. 12 - 13)

What I am implying here is that in one sense it is irrelevant whether or not the individual's identity is de-centred. There may not be any such thing as a core self. But this does not prevent the individual from believing that there is. What is important is whether or not the individual feels as though he or she can call upon a sense of internal coherence. Identity is psycho-social in the sense that the social

and the individual interact with each other, thereby giving the individual the sense of personal stability, however unstable that reality may be in actuality. The question that this thesis will go on to address is what role, if any, does consumption play in this process?

### **Conceptualising the relationship between consumption and identity**

Having raised the possibility that consumption, notably in relation to the work of Beck (1992), Bauman (1988) and Giddens (1991), may play some role in the construction of identities, I want to consider, in more detail, the broader implications of such a possibility. The problem here, as Dittmar (1992) suggests, is that contemporary society actually prioritises a cultural conception of identity that resides in ideas about autonomous individuality, which thereby encourage social scientific, and most obviously psychological, approaches to identity to neglect the interdependent nature of the relationship between the individual and society (Sampson, 1989). As far as the role of consumption in identity construction is concerned this has serious implications. At a common-sensical level the realm of consumption is often perceived as being inherently freedom inducing, in that it supposedly allows an individual the opportunity to foster his or her own identity as he or she sees fit. In this sense consumption is seen as having an asocial role in divorcing the individual from his or her social context, giving him or her a free rein to be as he or she pleases. This sort of an approach is misleading and could be suggested to merely reinforce the ideological impact of consumer capitalism (see Chapter 5). In fact, a psycho-social model of identity, and in particular identity construction, which considers the relationship between the individual and social change, is essential if the full psycho-social implications of consumerism are to be realised.

It could be argued, in this context, that consumer capitalism actively plays on the way in which individual identities are continually updated as new experiences



and information are encountered, as Grotevant (1992) suggests (see Chapter 5). Can we, indeed, accept Rojek's (1993) argument that,

"Consumer culture encourages a positive feel-good, keep-fit, acquisitive attitude which marginalizes the traditional question of what life is for. Even death is something that happens to other people... In such circumstances our inner life becomes characterized by a certain numbness. We shrink from deep commitments and cast our energies in leisure out toward reassuring, consumerist experience which requires passive involvement or transitory relationships which avoid putting ourselves on the line. Our blatant interest in the distant in space and in time is a symptom of our growing distance from inner relationships." (p. 212)

Does, in effect, consumption amount to an easy option, a means of avoiding an identity crisis in a world where family and community ties are increasingly tenuous? This is the sort of question I will attempt to address throughout this thesis.

What is certain is that there has been an historical change in the cultural meaning of consumption which has implications for the construction of identities in contemporary society. From this point of view, then, as Storey (1993) points out, culture is no longer ideological, as such; that is it no longer disguises the economic activities of capitalist society. Rather, it has itself become arguably the most important economic activity there is. This in turn reflects the collapse of the distinction between high and popular culture. Bonner and du Gay (1992) describe this development as a new 'regime of the self', in that in consumer culture consumers actively seek to maximise the worth of their existence through lifestyles that are assembled through personal choices in the marketplace. In effect, the individual is obliged to make the "right" choices in order to make the

most of their individual existence in a consumer-driven society. The transience of consumer goods appears, in turn, to encourage an emphasis on superficial impressions. It is through consumption, as Miller (1994) suggests, that the individual establishes his or her individuality, but that individuality is constructed very much on the surface, so that arguably the inside “core” of the individual which gives rise to their identity can only be described as “empty.”

As a result of the decline of family, community, work and class based social bonds, nothing appears to remain which people can call upon that can provide them with solid foundations according to which they can develop a stable sense of identity. As such, they are obliged to resort to look inside themselves. Seabrook (1978) argues that all people are able to find in this context is a cluster of personal choices and individual preferences, more often than not consumption-based, that can offer no real hope of personal stability. Frosh (1991) therefore suggests that what emerges is a sense of identity that can only be transient,

“as the rapidity and brutality of social and material transformation leaves few areas of certainty or arenas in which individuals can control their own destiny; more metaphysically, there is never any way of knowing for certain where we are or what constitute our worth. Modernity displaces, disturbs, deconstructs and redeploys; that is its nature, and any social structure with a nature like that must produce a fragmentary environment for personal life.” (p.191)

Some authors perceive this historical development as essentially counter-productive, in that an individual in contemporary society is judged according to his or her possessions, clothes and “personality”, rather than his or her “character”, to the extent that the individual becomes obsessed with superficial

impressions and images “to the point where the self becomes almost indistinguishable from its surface” (Lasch, 1984, p.30). Thus, the consumer lives in an insubstantial world dominated by fantasy. Lasch (1984) sees the experience of identity as becoming increasingly uncertain and problematical largely because consumers no longer inhabit, “a world that exists independently of themselves” (p. 32). From this perspective, common life is seen to have disintegrated, freeing the individual’s imagination from external constraints and yet exposing him or her to the anxieties of an inner-directed life experience. Perhaps this sort of approach underestimates the cementing role that consumption can play in the lives of consumers. This proposition will be tested in my empirical chapters. What I am prepared to suggest at this stage, however, is that it should not be assumed that the transience of identity is a necessarily negative process, in that, as Miller (1994) points out,

“The ability of material culture to act increasingly effectively as frames allows for the increasing ability of social actors to take on a variety of partial identities which might be seen as contradictory and in conflict if put in direct relation to one another... This pluralism, however, does not render the subject less authentic simply by reason of its diversity; indeed, in many respects, the development of multi-faceted forms of identity is the most appropriate response to a modernity which has contradiction as an intrinsic condition.” (p.316)

It can therefore be argued that the wares of consumer culture can be adapted to the consumers own ends and that in fact the flexibility and freedom that this allows the individual are, at least in part, positive. Willis (1990) recognises the positive potential of mass consumer culture in that, “there is now a whole social and cultural medium of interwebbing common meaning and identity-making... elite or “official” culture has lost its dominance” (p.128). This may be true to an

extent. However, I would prefer to see the relationship between consumption and identity as a complicated balancing act between structure and agency (see Chapter 5). In this sense, the thoughts of Davis (1992) mirror my own,

“How, then, do social identities relate to fashion?... although we ourselves are actively (and a good deal of the time, self-consciously) engaged in the construction and articulation of our social identities - we are not passive recipients of identities ascribed to us by some remote abstract entity terms “society” - there are nevertheless strong collective currents that impinge on our sense of self at different times during our lives and at different historical moments.” (pp. 16 - 17)

The fact is that despite the recognition that consumption *appears* to have an increasingly significant role in constructing identities the work that has considered this question directly is limited. One of the seminal contributions to this debate was that of Belk (1988) who examined the relationship between possessions and the sense of self. Belk concludes that it is a fact of modern life that we “learn, define and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions” (p. 160). Thus, he discusses the existence of the “extended self” as a means of considering the symbolic significance of consumption. More recently, the relationship between consumption and identity has been considered, in some detail, by Dittmar (1992) who calls for a diversified approach to the link between identity and possessions. From her social constructionist perspective, Dittmar concludes that possessions transcend their instrumental and utilitarian functions, encompassing symbolic meanings within social groups or societies, in order that material objects are used as a means of communicating who someone is (or would like to be) to others and oneself. In this sense, Dittmar argues that possessions act as material symbols of identity, counteracting the sense of

fragmentation that I discussed above, and simultaneously providing some sense of historical continuity.

In this respect, fashion and in particular, clothing may be seen to be particularly important forms of consumption, as far as identity constructions are concerned, in that they serve as a means of expressing and negotiating an individual's ongoing identity (see Finkelstein, 1991; Davis, 1992; Barnard, 1996). McCracken (1990) argues that fashion is less of a language than a limited set of pre-fabricated codes, a shorthand way of signalling place and identity, as well as a way of performing social interaction. Clothing therefore, constitutes a code. The individual's interpretation of clothing fashion is constrained by pre-established conventions of how clothes should be worn. The main point here, as Davis (1992) notes, is that, as individuals, we are actively engaged in the construction and articulation of our social identities. We are, in effect, far more than mere passive recipients of identities ascribed to us by structures; though at the same time there are strong collective influence on our identities, in the sense that we as individuals are subject to similar life experiences, tensions and concerns, which regardless of how we interpret them individually seek some form of expression. Fashion, therefore, addresses itself to these collective facets of our social identities.

The problem here, however, is that the grounded expressions of people's identities, and the role which consumption and fashion, for instance, play in such a process has generally remained unexplored. McCracken's (1990) thoughts are particularly relevant here,

"Our culture with a thoroughness and enthusiasm unheralded in the ethnographic record, has subjected it's beliefs and practices to detailed study. It has with the same thoroughness and enthusiasm also made

material possessions one of its most compelling preoccupations. It is therefore doubly odd and unfortunate that study of the use of goods in the construction of self and world should have suffered such prolonged and profound neglect.” (p. 89)

It is such neglect that this thesis intends to begin to redress. In order to do so I contend that the socially constructed notion of identity which I discussed above is of crucial importance.

Consumption plays an important role in this process precisely because it underpins the everyday experience of socio-economic change. As such, there is an argument that consumption, notably in the guise of shopping, has, arguably, become *the* primary focus for everyday cultural experience. The structural and ideological implications of consumerism are therefore a key concern of this research. In this context, in the remainder of this thesis, I will consider the role which consumption plays in constructing young people’s actual identities. In effect, the operational definition of identity that I shall be adopting throughout follows Gabriel and Lang’s (1995) contention that identity is essentially,

“a changing, precarious and problematic entity, the product of an individual’s perpetual adaptation to his or her environment. Uniqueness is not given, but is achieved; continuity can be undermined or ruptured. Psychological identity is the product of psychological work; it must be nurtured and defended, worked for and fought over. The importance of material objects to these processes... [is] seminal.” (p.84)

### **The fluidity of identity**

The main point to be taken from this chapter is that, above all, identities are *fluid*. Though I would argue it would be an exaggeration to suggest that identities have

been de-centred; on the other hand, it would certainly be a simplification to suggest that a young person adopts an identity which he or she retains throughout the life-course. Breakwell's (1983) battlefield analogy was an accurate one. Without the appropriate methodologies casualties in any study of identity formation are likely to be severe. The complexity so characteristic of research in this area has not only on the one hand made it highly appealing, as Grotevant (1992) points out, but have also served to stimulate a debate as to the extent of its scientific usefulness. Research into identity suffers above all from a lack of any sort of authoritative means of measurement. Certainly so far as sociology is concerned measurement of the notion of identity barely comes into the equation. Identity *is* a crucial reflection of the relationship between the individual and society which *can* and *should* be understood with careful and appropriately applied empirical insight. Finally, it is important to remember that it is all too easy to fall into the trap of becoming so preoccupied with consumption as to over-estimate its significance to identity construction in contemporary society. As such, a sober consideration of the impact of consumption on everyday life is essential.

I want to conclude this chapter by prioritising Bauman's (1996) contention, above, that what characterises the postmodern 'problem of identity' is the need on the part of the individual to actively avoid fixation and stability; the idea that in a postmodern world identity exists but, as such, far from providing stability, actively promotes the instabilities that an individual so fervently seeks. As far as identity is concerned, the main issue that I want to address in this thesis is what role, if any, consumption plays in this process. Is consumption a stabilising or destabilising influence on young people's lives? The literature discussed above gives conflicting signals in this respect. Are the swings between order and *disorder* that Featherstone (1991) describes actually liberating or undermining, and either way what role does consumption play in this process? In my next

chapter I will discuss, in more detail, the specifics of youth consumption and youth identities. This in itself, may help to simplify an understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity. But, in the final analysis as I have tried to argue throughout this chapter, discussions as to the 'problem of identity' can only begin to be resolved if they are suitably contextualised. The empirical work I shall present in Chapters 6 to 8 will attempt to go some way towards achieving this goal.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Youth**

Having considered the question of identity during the course of the previous chapter, I now want to go on to discuss the significance of the youth experience, notably, in the context of the relationship between consumption and identity. The sheer volume of research into 'youth' and 'adolescence' is quite overwhelming and often incoherent. There seems to be a general consensus that 'youth' amounts to an especially important period in a person's life in as much as issues concerned with identity 'work', the ways in which an individual constructs a sense of identity, loom especially large during the teenage years. Yet the actual relationship between empirical research and theory addressing the relationship between the social and psychological experience of youth is at best confused. However, it is my contention that the youth experience is, in fact, especially important in the sociological approach to consumption, in as much as young people are popularly believed to be 'vulnerable' to consumerism in general, and to advertising in particular, and, in turn, are generally perceived to have a particularly expressive relationship with what it is they consume. The significance of this relationship needs to be addressed.

#### **Situating youth**

Before I can consider the nature of the relationship between youth and consumption, I need to ask the following rather complex question: what is youth? Thus, in what follows I will consider what is significant about the contemporary experience of youth, and academic approaches to this experience, as a means of contextualising the broader debates. At its simplest, authors such as Jones and Wallace (1992), note that youth can be defined as an interstitial

phase in the life course which resides between childhood and adulthood. In the contemporary world adults are treated as citizens, as Jones and Wallace note, whilst children are not. In this respect, youth could be described as an especially difficult period in a person's life during which young people have neither the stabilities or the resources to exist as fully fledged citizens of a consumer culture.

As Evans and Furlong (1996) argue, youth has tended to be portrayed, historically, as a site of secondary socialisation within which young people develop clear ideas of their future position in the broader social order. Though the point here, as I will go on to discuss, is that the clarity of such ideas are not always sufficiently developed. In this sense, the key focus of youth research in recent years has been 'youth transitions'. The transition to work and the role of education has often been the primary concern in this context (e.g. Gray et al., 1992, Roberts, 1995). Authors such as Jones and Wallace (1992) and Roberts (1995), argue that young people are experiencing more extended transitions both into employment, and adulthood, than was previously the case. In effect, the experience of youth has become elongated. As such, young people are increasingly taking up post-compulsory education as a means of offsetting the harsh realities of the job market. And yet thousands of young people continue to fall through the safety net of education and training (Clement, 1996). Authors such as Jones and Wallace (1992) see the youth experience as a series of youth transitions, the transition to adulthood being dependant upon young people's ability to successfully achieve particular transitions, such as those from school to work, as well as domestic or family transitions, and housing transitions.

The worry here is not only that youth transitions are becoming extended, but that they, in turn, are becoming increasingly difficult. Erik Erikson, as I noted in Chapter 3, refers to youth as a sort of psycho-social moratorium. Perhaps it would be more appropriate, as Roberts (1995) notes, to discuss youth as a period

in *limbo*. The apparent restlessness of the youth experience reflects the restlessness of modern society as a whole (see Simmel, 1964). It is in this sense that youth is a barometer for broader social change. Young people can, in effect, as Jones and Wallace (1992) note, be perceived as an index of social ills. This feeling is no more in evidence than in the spheres of employment and family life,

“The sheer pace of economic, technological, and occupational change means that few careers can any longer be relied on to last until retirement. The increased instability of economic life is almost certainly connected, albeit in complex ways, to the fact that family life is also less stable than formerly and marriage can no longer be relied on to last for life.” (Roberts, 1995, p. 117)

### **Youth and social change**

Bearing in mind the above arguments, the significance of the youth experience is not, I would suggest, best understood in the context of youth sub-cultures, but rather in terms of *cultures of youth*. That is, youth culture cannot be discussed within the confines of debates pertaining to specific sub-cultural experiences, in that young people’s experiences are not as structured by these experiences as much as they have been in the past. It is important to recognise that during the 60s and 70s analyses of youth subcultures developed to such an extent (eg. Cohen, 1972, Hebdige, 1979) that youth cultures, as opposed to youth itself, came to be seen as an index of social change. As such, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) note, youth sub-cultures have been given more attention within broader sociological debates than can ever be warranted in terms of the numbers of young people that are actually involved in them. Widdicombe and Wooffitt go on to point out that there is a basis for arguing that youth subcultures barely even exist in late twentieth century Britain.

My argument is that though there might be evidence to suggest, at least to some extent, that the enterprise culture we live in marginalises youth and that they remain powerless, beyond criminal activities, to do anything about basic structural problems, it does not necessarily follow that young people have no effective role in the development of social change. At the very least young people play an important role as indicators of underlying social change. Indeed, given the fact that the rebelliousness of youth has been exaggerated historically, there is no reason to suspect that young people's everyday experience is not as valid an indicator of what contemporary society is about today, than it was thirty years ago. Certainly, it can be accepted that,

"There is a tendency to overstate the cultural power of youth in the sphere of consumption... Youth-orientated journalism has a vested interest in doing so, to flatter the youthful consumer's powers of musical and fashion discrimination or perhaps , in the more 'serious' forms, to arbitrate on taste, to signify where the action is, in magazines emerging in the 1980s such as *The Face* and its successors..."

(McGuigan, 1992, p.91)

However, the point here is that if there is a strong argument for suggesting that young people are actually deeply committed to the values and institutions of our society, this in itself is of significant sociological interest (Davis, 1990). As such, the grounded cultures of routine youth experience is as significant, if not more so, than the more dramatic aspects of youth sub-cultures. I will now illustrate the value of cultures of youth as indicators of social change in the context of a discussion of notions of individualization and risk.

## **Young people in a risk society**

Two concepts can be used to help to explain the unstable nature of the youth experience. The first, briefly, is individualization. Roberts (1995) argues that young people's experiences are at the forefront of broader social processes of individualization; that is, the increasingly diverse nature of the youth experience, whereby a young person shares less and less in way of common biographies with his or her peers. With longer transitions into employment, longer transitions towards adulthood, more post-compulsory education and training, a more complicated mix of part and full-time employment, a narrower range of employment opportunities, and higher rates of residential mobility, young people have increasingly diverse personal biographies. It is in this sense that the notion of choice is important to the experience of young people who find themselves in a situation where they are forced to make choices in a rapidly changing social world,

"The concept of individualization has now addressed [the issue of choice] and according to this thesis, 'choice' is not free, but is forced upon young people by the changing structures within which they find themselves; young people are made to choose between sometimes limited alternatives and construct, in the process their self-identities."

(Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp. 45 - 46)

Before I go on to consider this issue in the context of consumption I want to discuss, in more detail, a further concept that might be developed as a means of understanding contemporary youth transitions: risk. The two most influential theoretical approaches to the 'risk society' are undoubtedly those of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). Their arguments centre on the contention that contemporary experience of society amounts to a late modernity in which the old scientific world is being challenged, where predictability and certainty become a thing of

the past, and where a new set of risks are brought into existence at both a macro and micro-scale. The qualitative experience of identity is therefore markedly different in high or late modernity. In effect, as Giddens (1991) notes, identity becomes a reflexive project. The individual is constituted in an increasingly global culture which appears to offer a greater diversity of lifestyle choices.

Beck (1992) argues that it is possible to identify a new mode of socialisation, a 'metamorphosis' or 'categorical shift' in the make-up of the relationship between the individual and society. He suggests that in advanced modernity the individual becomes removed from traditional support mechanisms and support relationships (see Chapter 3), and that consequently the constraints of everyday life, as experienced by the worker and the consumer, take on new significance. Thus the social supports that underpin an individual's everyday life experience are increasingly and predominantly secondary in nature, as the individual becomes dependant, amongst other things, upon the vagaries of fashion. The irony here, then, is that though we live in an increasingly individualised culture, the individual experiences a less autonomous private existence, in the sense that he or she is subject to public criterion of individuality. In other words, individuality is increasingly subject to external forces, and arguably standardisation. Beck (1992) therefore argues that this creates an institutional dependency on the part of the individual who becomes increasingly susceptible to personal crises.

Such crises are seen to be reinforced by the fact that the individual lives a life based more than ever before in the present. That is, the young person of today lives an ahistorical existence, in the sense that the historical foundations and context in which, for instance, their family developed, are not deployed as a means of structuring experience. All emphasis therefore becomes focused upon the individual's interpretations of the risk society and how he or she shapes his

or her individual biography. Thus, the everyday experience of advanced modernity is characterised, for Beck (1992), by the fact that,

“each person’s biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependant on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally increasing. Individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become self-reflexive; socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced.” (p. 135)

In this context, as Beck (1992) points out, the market comes to play an ever more active role in people’s lives. Indeed, it could be argued that mass consumption provides an essential focus for young people who experience risk in it’s most dramatic form, namely in the context of identity construction. In conditions of late modernity the suggestion here then is that the individual is at a permanent disadvantage, in as much as he or she is under constant pressure to manipulate society in ways that will serve his or her reflexive biography. Potentially then, the individual becomes preoccupied with maintaining a particular personal image. Beck (1992) argues that this creates an ego-centred world-view on the part of the individual. This opens the individual up to an increased risk of failure, in the sense that any failure is perceived on their part as implicating the inadequacies of the individual. One intention of this thesis is identify the role that consumption plays in this process.

Giddens (1991) argues that the difficulties of living in a risk culture do not necessarily reflect greater insecurity than that which was true of eras prior to late modernity. Such difficulties, argues Giddens, are generated by the risk

calculations undertaken by the individual, and also according to how the individual screens out contingencies that might infer risk, the individual being intent upon ensuring that he or she can avoid risk as much as possible, dealing instead with what he or she feels comfortable with,

“The development of relatively secure environments of day-to-day life is of central importance to the maintenance of feelings of ontological security. Ontological security, in other words, is sustained primarily through routine itself... The protective cocoon depends more and more on the coherence of routines themselves, as they are ordered within the reflexive project of the self.” (Giddens, 1991, p. 167)

The suggestion here is that the process of individualisation brings with it an increasing unstable, risky, everyday life experience. As traditional links between the family, school and work have weakened, young people have begun to enter into increasingly uncertain routes into adulthood. Authors, such as Furlong and Cartmel (1997), argue that life characterised by risk is essentially unpredictable, and that this is particularly true of young people’s experience. Indeed,

“The most pertinent ways in which young people today make their ways into risk societies is that they have to make decisions, to take steps, which will almost certainly affect their future opportunities, but where the outcomes are moderate possibilities at best... There is simply no way in which young people cannot avoid risk taking.” (Roberts, 1995, pp. 117 - 118)

Young experiences, notably patterns of schooling and routes into the labour market, are therefore argued to be very different to what they were a mere generation ago. Unemployment has become a common part of youth labour



transitions (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Thus as Furlong and Cartmel go on to argue, as school to work transitions have become protracted, and as increasingly diverse routes are opened up to them, young people are faced with a complex range of options, which need to be confronted at a personal subjective level. This creates a growing sense of insecurity and unease for young people. That is, young people are in an increasingly precarious position where they make important life-decisions unsure if they will reap the rewards or pay the penalties. Youth then, is a period of adaptation and adjustment (Roberts, 1995). A young person may undertake a university career, but there is no guarantee of a professional career afterwards. Young people may, in a sense, be liberated from the traditional support networks of the family, but such forcible emancipation brings with it risks, not least, the risks inherent in a rapidly rising divorce rate. In effect, young people are left to grow up in a society,

“where few things are certain, where many choices are possible, and where it is not clear which options will be possible and impossible and for whom” (Chisholm and du Bois, 1993, p.260)

### **Youth lifestyles and consumption**

Having identified some of the main issues and problems characteristic of the youth experience in a consumer society, I am pinpointing risk as a fundamental, not to say a routine, aspect of young people's everyday lives. In this context, and bearing in mind the issues I raised in Chapter 2 concerning the apparent ubiquity of consumption in contemporary society, I want to go on, at this stage, to consider the specific role of consumption in young people's leisure and lifestyles.

The construction of young people's identities in contemporary society is undoubtedly a strong indicator of some of the historical transitions that society has undergone. This point is perhaps most lucidly expressed by Seabrook (1978)

who argues that the whole experience of growing up in contemporary society has been transformed from an experience based on the culture of working class communities to one based on the culture of the shopping precinct,

“The child tends to be stripped of all social influences but those of the market-place; all sense of place, function and class is weakened, the characteristics of region or clan, neighbourhood or kindred are accentuated. The individual is denuded of everything but... appetites, desires and tastes wrenched from any context of human obligation or commitment... A sense of self has to be sought in the parade of images and products; and this culture becomes the main determinant upon morality, beliefs and purpose, usurping more and more territory that formerly belonged to parents, teachers, communities, priests and politics alike.”

(Seabrook, 1978, pp.95 - 96)

Seabrook (1978) therefore sees the old transmission of identity as having broken down, to the extent that the manufacturers have claimed the power to guarantee children a safe passage through to adulthood and parents have no choice but to defer to what amounts to a highly powerful colonising power. Perhaps, Seabrook (1978) can be criticised rather for hankering after times gone by, and by doing so exaggerating the deficiencies of the present. What he does do, however, is illustrate the extent to which historical change has an important role to play in the construction of identities.

The actual emergence of young people as a viable market in their own right can be dated back to the 1950s, with the development of a booming post-war economy. Indeed, Davis (1990) notes that by the 1950s average teenage earnings had increased by over fifty per cent in real terms in comparison to the pre-war years. It was during this period, as Stewart (1992) notes, that fashions,

entertainments, foods and drinks, specifically aimed at satisfying the 'needs' of the young consumer came onto the market. Though young people's spending did not account for a large percentage of overall consumer spending at this time, the fact that their spending tended to be concentrated on non-essential sectors made them an especially attractive proposition to the market. Young people found themselves, as Stewart (1992) points out, in a unique position. They benefited from the newly found affluence of their parents and yet had none of their financial burdens. Gradually then, young people emerged as an increasingly important market, as the disposability of their income became increasingly obvious, until by 1990 research carried out by BMRB found that two-thirds of 15-19 year olds had some form of a current account (Stewart, 1992).

The suggestion here is that consumption emerged in the post-war years as an increasing important focus in young people's lives. Of course, this cannot be described as a process solely determined by the desires of the consumers themselves. Marketers became cunningly perceptive as new consumption niches were established. But what did emerge was an interactive relationship between young people and the market. At least, to some extent, young people respond and the market listens,

"The relationship is based on consumption, of course, but the interaction encourages creativity and quality in the production of goods and communication, and predictability in the audience... The tendencies to conform are encouraged also by the use of media and consumer information as communication among teens. Shopping as a group entertainment activity is only the last stage of a process by which teens collect and share information on what's in and proceed to adopt a style."  
(White, 1993, p.104)

Many commentators (eg. Hendry et al., 1993) suggest that it is during their leisure time that young people 'truly become themselves'. With the luxury of being able to prioritise their free time and at a time in their lives when they have less responsibilities than they are ever likely to have, young people are able to establish a distinct realm of their own, what Marsland (1993) describes as "an island of freedom... a sacred bastion of individuality" (p.108). As such, a Department of Education and Science survey (1983) into young people's lifestyles comes to the conclusion that for many young people how they spend their leisure time is *the* question that constantly remains central to their life experience. Often such leisure time is spent in the shopping mall. Indeed, Langman (1992) argues that mall culture has a particularly influential role as far as young people are concerned, in as much as it provides a hangout in which they can be free of parental pressure; a community of peers, which simultaneously confirms to young people the legitimacy of a consumer lifestyle. Thus as Presdee (1990) notes young people are attracted to shopping malls as 'cathedrals of consumption'; often asserting their right to claim space as non-consumers in a consumer-oriented world.

In this context, as both Rojek (1989) and Griffin (1993) point out, there is always a danger that the freedom allowed young people as consumers, through their leisure-time, is overstated, thereby reproducing the myth of individual choice, and arguably oiling the wheels of capitalist economies. This tendency should be avoided if an effective sociological understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity is to be established. In addition, it should also be noted that however much young people may assert themselves as non-consumers, the mere fact that they *cannot* consume may well have important implications for their identity construction.

What is interesting, in this respect, is the fact that young people's consumer 'freedom' is often constructed within strict economic parameters. Indeed, it is ironic, as Jones and Wallace (1992) point out, that though in an increasingly risky society, within which many young people are forced into extended economic dependency, *and* excluded from the benefit system, young people are thrown into the market, as consumers, at a very early age. They are an attractive prospect to the marketplace in terms of both their current disposable income and their long term potential as brand-aware consumers, a process exacerbated by the deregulation of credit in the 1980s.

In discussing the impact of consumer culture upon the lives of young people there has then been a tendency to see young people as a highly vulnerable sector of the population, easily persuaded for instance, by the superficialities of advertising (see Nava and Nava, 1990). More recently the realisation that young people are, in fact, quite capable of transforming the politics of consumption for their own ends and in turn, quite capable of a critical stance to what consumer culture has to offer them, has emerged (Griffin, 1993; Willis, 1990). In particular, Willis sees culture as lived practice. He sees an individual's identity as flowing from symbolic exchange through which social actors emerge. As such young consumers do not buy consumer goods passively or uncritically but transform, appropriate and recontextualise meanings. Willis (1990) is therefore highly critical of theory-intensive approaches to consumer culture, and vehemently advocates a move towards an interpretation of "the movement of the real world" (p.27).

### **The role of peer influence**

In terms of constructing young people's 'real worlds' the peer group might be said to play a significant role. Indeed, it might be possible to argue, as Hendry et al. (1993) suggest, that the role of the peer group is to actively regulate expressive

behaviour, largely based on the wares offered by the material world. The relationship between the peer group and consumption is therefore an important consideration, and one that I intend to illuminate through my empirical chapters. Indeed, this can be closely related to my discussion in Chapter 3 of how group-centred distinctiveness is seen to actively boost an individual's self-esteem. As such, it is worth noting that conventional thought sees adolescents as being highly susceptible to peer influence, largely as a result of their own inability to develop an adequate sense of self (Hopkins, 1989). The group is therefore seen to represent an unhealthy source of pressure upon young people who are seen, from this perspective, to be developmentally inadequate. In this context, conformity has been a prime focus of psychological approaches to the peer group, the result being that often young people are portrayed as "normless and anomic units" (Salmon, 1992, p. 119). However, as Hopkins (1989) argues, this sort of analysis underestimates the fact that peer groups have their own cultures, which though not as visually dramatic as the youth subcultures of the 60s and 70s, are equally as formative in constructing the experiences of young people in the 90s. The peer group provides its own definition of what is and is not appropriate behaviour and the individual chooses the extent to which he or she accepts the indicators that that group offers. Such offers are significant to a young person precisely because they offer alternatives to those provided by the adult world,

"The crucial social meaning of youth is withdrawal from adult control and influence compared with childhood. Peer groups are the milieu into which young people withdraw. In at least most societies, this withdrawal to the peer group is, within limits, legitimated by the adult world. Time and space are handed over to young people to work out for themselves in auto-socialization the developmental problems of self and identity which cannot be handled by the simple direct socialization appropriate to

childhood. There is a moratorium on compliance and commitment and leeway allowed for a relatively unguided journey with peers towards autonomy and maturity." (Marsland, 1987, p.12)

The role that the peer group plays as an arena in which young people interact and communicate is clearly important. This research will also consider the role that the peer group plays in the context of the relationship between consumption and identity.

### **Youth consumption as cultural capital**

In considering the above issues, the notion of identity clearly provides the sociologist with a useful tool. It supplies a means of addressing the relationship between youth and social change, and how the two interact. As I suggested in Chapter 2, the current debate over postmodernity suggests that the experience of contemporary society is characterised by constantly shifting identities, the playing with identities from one situation to the next, whereby the individual ascribes different meanings at different times. Abercrombie (1994) argues that this is most clearly illustrated in the case of young people. Young consumers are arguably more adept at, and more willing to, experiment with their identities, no matter what boundaries (whether they be class, gender or race) of identity, may appear to constrain them. It is in this sense that young people are, indeed, highly effective barometers of social change, in that they use the cultural capital available to them in far more lucid and expressive ways than their elders (see Bourdieu, 1984).

Youth consumption treads a peculiarly delicate path between media influence and freedom of choice; a peculiarly delicate path between conformity and individual meaning. But conformity, as Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) point out, is not neutral. It represents a highly significant, and meaning-centred issue

for the young consumer. White (1993) for instance, discusses the phenomenon of young teenage girls in Japan who travel around in trains for the sole purpose of seeing what fashions are new and how these fashions are interpreted by fellow teenagers. As such, style, and the use of consumer goods to establish a style, appears to represent a very important aspect of young people's lives,

"A very large proportion of the leisure time of young people is indeed devoted to "putting on the style". But this is no trivial matter. For it is the outward expression of their self-exploration and testing of alternative identities - which is precisely the developmental task for which young people use their leisure time." (Marsland, 1993, p.130)

In effect, young people need a realm in which their role relationships can feel relaxed and comfortable and within which the self can be invigorated (Hendry et al., 1993). In a world where full participation in adult culture is precluded by social change which has actively extended youth transitions, young people are obliged to develop their own cultures, arguably, in an attempt to find a more meaningful identity. Equally, therefore, consumption could be argued to fit the bill,

"Consumer styles and artifacts come to be perceived as an integral part of [young people's] identities. Participation in markets thus becomes a 'need', so that young people feel they need to be conspicuously sporting the latest styles and show their awareness of the latest trends" (Jones and Wallace, 1992, pp. 119 - 120)

Accepting that consumption has the *potential* to play an increasingly significant role in young people's lives, a viable sociological means of addressing the role that consumption has, or has not, got, in the construction of youth identities,



needs to be established. Up to now any assessment of this question has tended to be based on conjecture rather than grounded research. Is consumption used by young people as a means of constructing identities and if so, does it provide a viable means of doing so? Increasingly, commentators have to come to discuss the youth, or more specifically, the adolescent experience, as more of a transitional process than a stage. The fact that young people are apparently freer and more independent than ever before and that they appear to be so at a younger and younger age (Stewart, 1992), implies, at a common-sensical level, that consumption may have some role to play in the development of such transitions. Before addressing this question empirically, I will consider how the relationship between structure and agency can, in turn, help to inform such a project.

## Chapter 5

### Structure, Agency and Ideology

The relationship between structure and agency is a pivotal concern of contemporary social theory, and arguably, has always been *the* key sociological concern (Archer, 1995). By confronting the structure and agency problem, Archer (1995) argues, sociologists are in fact addressing “the most pressing social problem of the human condition” (p. 65). This point is acutely evident at an everyday experiential level, in that life is actively constituted by the contrary feeling that the individual is both free and yet somehow simultaneously constrained. It is at this experiential level that this thesis attempts to address the question of structure and agency in the context of consumption, arguing that in the late twentieth century the relationship between structure and agency is constructed most visibly, and yet ideologically subtly, in this particular realm of everyday life. This chapter therefore has two primary intentions:

- 1) to discuss the role that the structure and agency debate plays in the development of an understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity and,
- 2) to consider, subsequently, the ideological impact of consumption in everyday life; thereby providing a basis for addressing this issue in more depth in Chapter 10.

In this context, I will focus, later in this chapter, on the work of Giddens (1976; 1984; 1991) which is particularly significant, as well as that of Simmel (1957; 1959; 1964; 1971; 1990) and Bourdieu (1984).

## Structure, agency and consumption

The structure and agency debate has come to the fore in recent years (see Waters, 1994, Layder, 1994). Discussing, in particular the influence of the 'macro-micro' issue on contemporary sociological thought, Layder (1994) points out that the structure and agency dualism and the debate that surrounds it, highlight the fact that people are 'agents' in the social world; that they are actively able to do things which affect the everyday social relationships in which they are embedded. As far as this research is concerned, the value of the structure/agency debate is to highlight the role of everyday social interactions and encounters in the construction of social worlds, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the way in which wider social contexts influence such interactions. Society, then, is inseparable from its human components because the very existence of that society depends upon human activities and as such, what society is, at any given time, depends upon those activities. On the other hand, individuals are not immutable as social agents, because existence as social beings is also affected by the experience of the society people live in, and by their efforts to transform that society (Archer, 1995). The suggestion here, is that *potentially*, consumption is a significant cultural resource in this process.

Consumption has emerged as a key feature of the structure and agency debate, in as much as it illustrates the extremities of the debate in question. In the context of consumption the problem seems to lie in the temptation to adopt a structural conception of the impact of consumption, or at the other end of the spectrum, a liberal economic choice approach that tends to see consumption as a free expression of people's wants, or as an explosion of creative individualism. In effect, as Miller (1995) suggests, this amounts to a division between those who see consumption as *bad*, and those who see it as *good*.

The Frankfurt School adopt a structural conception of consumption, with little room for individual agency. Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno (1973) consider the mass deception perpetuated by the culture industry, which thereby ensures that consumers are compelled to buy and use it's products despite seeing through them. Adorno and Horkheimer (1973) stress the commodity character of popular music, arguing that, historically, music has degenerated, to the extent that it no longer creates new ideas, but repeats old ones, over and over again (see Adorno, 1991). In this context, Horkheimer and Adorno recognise that consumption plays an ideological role: audience reactions can be standardised through the distribution of standardised products; thereby ensuring that economic dividends are maximised. In effect, the consumer becomes more malleable for the purpose of programmed consumption, not solely in terms of music, but for all forms of consumption. The mass consumption of music, and indeed of other products created by the culture industry, can therefore only result in passive consumption; a form of consumption that ensures that the so-called 'needs' of the masses are determined by the culture industry, thereby maintaining an ideological hold over the individual. Such themes were further developed, as Lansley (1994) notes, by writers in a North American liberal and Left tradition writing in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Packard, 1957; Galbraith, 1958; Marcuse, 1964). A common thread running through these approaches was the distinction between 'true' and 'false' needs and how it was that the dominant order created wants in order to ensure capitalism's survival.

At the other end of the spectrum, consumption can be seen to be freedom inducing and liberating. As such, Swingewood (1977) disputes Horkheimer and Adorno's (1973) claim that capitalist culture has degenerated into 'barbaric meaninglessness' preferring to argue that the capitalist economy has actually achieved unprecedented pinnacles of cultural richness, "on a scale unparalleled in human history" (p. ix). In this sense, consumption is celebrated as a source of

perpetual creativity and empowerment. This is an approach synonymous with the political Right, both in Britain and the United States during the 1980s and into the 1990s. Perhaps one of the most distinctive thinkers on this issue was Milton Friedman, who saw choice as an end in it's own right,

"When you vote daily in the supermarket, you get precisely what you voted for, and so does everyone else. The ballot box produces conformity without unanimity; the marketplace, unanimity without conformity."

(Friedman and Friedman, 1980, pp. 65 - 66.)

From an economic libertarian perspective social stability is based upon equal access, as opposed to equal chance. The suggestion here is that through the free market, and consumption, anything is possible. The market is, in effect, democratic. Individualism is touted as the most desirable basis for behaviour in society, in that if each person acts according to the basic psychological instinct for self-preservation, the end result will always be best for society as a whole. From this point of view, the nature of a person can be fully understood without reference to society. The market is therefore seen to offer infinite freedoms, one unleashed freedom leading on to another (see Kingdom, 1992).

Saunders (1981) provides a useful example of a sociological approach to consumption which highlights further the apparent advantages inherent in a free market. Saunders argues that the conflict that exists between producers and consumers, as opposed to traditional conflicts based upon class, have emerged as fundamental determinants of the modern life experience. Commending, in particular, the personal empowerment that results from owner occupation as, "An expression of personal identity and a source of ontological security" (Saunders, 1981, p. 203), Saunders emphasises how the market can provide it's own solutions, solutions premised on the authenticity of consumer rights.

## Giddens and structuration

Before I can begin to draw conclusions as to the role of the structure and agency debate in the relationship between consumption and identity, and thus, as to the validity of the two approaches above, it would be beneficial to consider, in more detail, the work of a theorist who considers both issues; namely Anthony Giddens. Giddens' theory of structuration amounts to one of the most accomplished, if empirically under-utilised, approaches to the structure and agency debate (see Bryant and Jary, 1991). Giddens (1976), as Blaikie (1993) notes, sees the production and reproduction of society as an accomplishment of social actors. His notion of the duality of structure, the idea that social structures are both the conditions and the consequences of social interaction, is central to his structuration theory. As such,

"social structures are both constituted *by* human agency, and yet at the same time are the very *medium* of this constitution" (Giddens, 1976, p.121)  
[author's emphasis]

In this sense, all social action involves structure and all structure involves human action. The human actor is therefore reflexive and monitors the on-going flow of activities in which he or she is involved, alongside basic structural conditions. Whereas Giddens would argue that sociology has traditionally exaggerated the constraining nature of structures, he in fact, sees structure as both constraining *and* enabling. Human beings are creative and responsive agents involved in a continual flow of conduct (see Ritzer, 1992). In this sense, Giddens sees structures as rules and resources that actors draw upon as they produce and reproduce society in their everyday actions. As such, by reflecting on their own behaviour, people are always capable, to some extent, of influencing and transforming their social situations.

What Giddens' structuration theory attempts to do, then, is to combine an understanding of strategic conduct with that of institutional analysis, that is the recurring patterns of interaction in a social system that embody the social structure. Giddens (1984) identifies three structural dimensions of social systems: signification, domination and legitimation. Giddens suggests that signification is fundamentally structured through language, in the sense that human beings negotiate meaning through communication and interaction. In this respect, Giddens agrees with the symbolic interactionists. As individuals, people bring 'interpretive schemes' to bear on social events and make sense of the social world by applying meanings. However, such meaning is also institutionalised in as much as people draw on socially available meanings to make sense of what they do. In turn, Giddens' notion of domination draws upon ideas about power, which he sees not so much as being an impersonal characteristic of social structures, but more as a social resource. In this context,

"By authorisation I refer to capabilities which generate command over persons and by 'allocation' I refer to capabilities which generate command over objects or other material phenomena." (Giddens, 1984, p. 32)

Material objects are therefore transformed into resources, and, in effect, become codes and normative sanctions. The third aspect of Giddens' classification is legitimation; the contention that every society has a set of institutionalised norms and values that uphold particular ways of doing things by making them appear to be legitimate. However, Giddens argues that this does not necessarily lead to the assumption that the norms which legitimate social structures are widely accepted.

Bearing the above three notions in mind, Giddens argues that people engage in strategic conduct whilst drawing upon interpretative schemes; facilities and

resources; and norms and values. It is through such action that society functions and, whether intentionally or unintentionally, social structure is reproduced. What Giddens is arguing, then, is that,

“...there is no such thing as a distinctive type of ‘structural explanation’ in the social sciences. All explanations will involve at least implicit reference to both the purposive, reasoning behaviour of agents and to its intersection with the constraining and enabling features of the social and material contexts of that behaviour.” (Giddens, 1984, p. 178-179)

In this context, identity is very much a negotiation between the individual and the social group. As such, Giddens’ analysis has some important implications for any discussion of the psycho-social impact of consumption. Giddens (1991) notes that since the 1950s, and most evidently during the 1980s, new social groups were emerging for whom consumption was increasingly important. Hence, consumer items arguably came to play a more significant role in the social construction of identity than more traditional sources such as age, occupation, or social class.

Giddens discusses the experience of self-identity in the context of the massive ‘intensional and extensional changes’ which are set into being by the onset of modernity. However, he also argues that it is misleading to suggest that contextual diversity in everyday life will necessarily promote a fragmented self. An integrated self is equally seen as a possibility, depending upon the ways in which the individual uses the cultural resources at his or her disposal. The argument underlying this thesis is that consumption is, potentially, an important resource in this respect. Indeed, Giddens (1991) recognises the significance of consumer capitalism in this process. He discusses the possibility of the commodification of the self in contemporary society in that, “self-actualisation is



packaged and distributed according to market criteria" (Giddens, 1991, p.198). However, this can only occur under conditions that are strongly influenced by the standardising effects of commodity capitalism.

The key point that Giddens (1991) makes is that people actively and creatively interpret the processes of commodification that impinge on their lives,

"...standardisation can often be turned into a mode of creating individual qualities... Mass produced clothing [for example] still allows individuals to decide selectively on styles of dress, however much the standardising influence of fashion and other forces, affect those individual decisions." (p. 200).

For Giddens, the narrative of the self is the product of a balance between structural influences on everyday life, such as standardised consumption patterns, and the personal appropriation of such influences. However, it should not be forgotten, as Giddens (1991) points out, that the designation of individual wants has become absolutely essential to the continuity of the capitalist system. In this respect, the novelty of consumption needs to be balanced against the pre-defined cultural parameters within which consumer practices are negotiated. The insidious nature of commodification therefore provides an important influence on the structure of everyday life. The extent to which such commodification represents a balance on the part of individuals between ready-made meaning and personal interpretation should therefore amount to a key consideration of the sociology of consumption. It can be argued in this context, that an insight into the subtleties of the structure and agency problem provides, in turn, a key to an understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity. Perhaps consumption is such a fundamental social and cultural resource that it plays an important role in actively underpinning the structure and agency relationship.

As a means of illustrating the benefit of studying the structure and agency debate in research that seeks to address the relationship between consumption and identity, I will now briefly consider this question as it appears in the work of two further contributors to the sociological understanding of consumption, namely, Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu.

## **Georg Simmel**

“Society... is only the synthesis or the general term for the totality of... specific interactions” (Simmel in Frisby, 1992, p.5)

Pivotal to Simmel’s conception of the experience of modern life is his contention that social processes are fundamentally psychological processes and that society exists precisely *because* of the consciousness on the part of individuals that they are tied to others. The reality of social processes, or sociation, as Waters (1994) points out, is therefore ultimately located in the mind, so that society amounts to a unity of cognition.

The idea that society is a product of each individual being party to a common set of knowledge is highly pertinent to any attempt to come to terms with the role of consumption in the relationship between the individual and society in the modern world. In effect, as Frisby (1992) notes, Simmel grounds his vision of society in the concept of interaction or reciprocal effect. Society, then, is a sum of its interacting parts and, as Frisby argues, Simmel’s suggestion is that the object of sociology should be to study the forms of sociation, by which individuals become members of society. From this perspective society is constituted by interactional forces *between* individuals. Frisby (1992) goes on to suggest that Simmel was working towards a conception of society that is grounded, above all, in members experience and knowledge of it,

“... [the individual] is absorbed in innumerable, specific relations and in the feeling and the knowledge of determining others and of being determined by them.” (Simmel, 1959, p. 338)

Central to Simmel’s impressionistic vision of modernity then is his analysis of the widening gap, characteristic of modernity, between the objective culture and the increasingly alienated individual who is continually frustrated in his or her quest for genuine individuality. As such,

“...the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy of his [*sic*] existence in the face of overwhelming social forces.” (Simmel, 1964, p.409).

Simmel (1990) sees money, and more specifically exchange, as being central to the experience of modernity. Identifying the metropolis as the seat of the mature money economy, he argues that the anonymity of relations in the metropolis are determined by the need for anonymous market relationships. Almost a century later, the impact of consumer culture within late capitalism is so profound that this argument has become imbued with more significance than Simmel could ever have imagined.

Interestingly, Simmel (1957) discusses, in some detail, the role of fashion as a social form of class demarcation juxtaposing the feeling of individuality with the security of commonality with others. In an increasingly commercial society where the pace of life becomes more and more intense, Simmel argues that fashion provides the only apparent means of recovering oneself, of stabilising the assault upon the senses which is characteristic of modern life. In fact, from this perspective, the whole history of society is seen to be a compromise between adherence and absorption in a social group and the need for individuation and

distinction from the members of such groups. The individual needs to feel that he or she is different to everybody else, in order to play upon the social circle's sensitivity for difference. These arguments are clearly important as far as the relationship between structure and agency is concerned. Simmel (1957) notes that as fashion spreads, it "gradually goes to its doom" (p. 543). As a particular style becomes more popular, the distinctive appeal of that style is gradually lost. But however transient fashion may be, Simmel argues that the fact that it is never generally in vogue, means that the individual can invest his or her own meanings in fashionable items. He or she feels special wearing a particular item and yet, at the same time,

"...feels inwardly supported by a set of persons who are striving for the same thing, not as in the case of other social satisfactions, by a set actually doing the same thing. The fashionable person is regarded with mingled feelings of approval and envy; we envy him [*sic*] as an individual, but approve of him as a member of a set or group." (Simmel, 1957, p.545)

Thus the individual can, to some extent, be distinctly individual, but only in the sense that everybody else is being an individual in the same ways. In effect, the structural influence of fashion, not least the role exchange has in constructing such structures, illustrates the complex interplay that exists between social experience and how that experience frees the individual of responsibility. Of course, these processes exist in the shadow of the money economy. The individual is allowed to court the benefits of individuality without the stresses involved if individuality was not, at least to some degree, dependant upon commonality (Simmel, 1990).

It cannot be denied, as Waters (1994) points out, that, perhaps as a direct result of Simmel appearing to reduce social structures to psychological processes of the

individual, his work has been of limited impact. This point can be at least partly attributed to the inflexibility of academic disciplines which have very conservative conceptions of what should and should not be regarded as being within their jurisdiction. However, Simmel provides some invaluable, if impressionistic, insights into the social nature of the individual and the social constraints that exist in any conception of individuality. Far from seeing society as an objective system dominating its members, Simmel sees society as an amalgamation of interactions or sociation. However, as Swingewood (1991) notes, Simmel clearly opposes the reductionism of psychology, which he sees as failing to grasp the sociological fact that changes in forms of sociation (the number of people interacting) necessarily engender new properties to the social situation; properties that cannot be derived from focusing upon the individual in isolation. This point can be illustrated further with a brief discussion of the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu to the structure and agency debate and his consideration of consumption in this context.

### **Pierre Bourdieu**

“In identifying what is worthy of being seen and the right way to see it, they are aided by their whole social group... and by the whole corporation of critics mandated by the group to produce legitimate classifications and the discourse necessarily accompanying any artistic enjoyment worthy of the name.” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.28)

Pierre Bourdieu presents a highly influential analysis of the social impact of consumption and its role in the structure and agency debate. Crucially, his theory of consumption is premised on a theory of structuration. Like Giddens, Bourdieu criticises the extremities of structural and interactionist approaches to social life, arguing that they are essentially reductionist in their respective outlooks. Pivotal

to this theory is Bourdieu's notion of the 'habitus'; everyday knowledge, or cultural capital, that reflects the routine experience of appropriate behaviour in particular cultures and sub-cultures. Bourdieu sees human experience as being determined by the habitus. What is interesting about Bourdieu's work, notably in *Distinction*, an empirical study of consumption in France in the 1960s and 1970s, was his insistence that consumers are not merely products of social structures. However, as Lee (1993) points out, Bourdieu does not adopt the opposite position by arguing that social action is entirely voluntary. Rather, by using the concept of the 'habitus' Bourdieu succeeds, at least partially, in presenting a balanced conception of the individual. He transcends both the ideology of individualism and subjectivism, as Branson and Miller (1991) note, by seeing individuals as the clue, as objects of empirical study, to an understanding which lies *beyond* the individual. Bourdieu defines the habitus as providing a group-distinctive framework of social cognition and interpretation; the mental structures which individuals carry around in their heads, in order that they can deal with the world,

"Life-styles are thus the systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of the habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as 'distinguished', 'vulgar' etc.) The dialectic of conditions and habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of a power relation, into a system of perceived differences, distinctive properties, that is, a distribution of symbolic capital, legitimate capital, whose objective truth is misrecognized." (Bourdieu, 1984, p.172)

Bourdieu (1984) suggests that the habitus is in fact instigated from early childhood through interaction with family and various other social agents and, as Lee (1993) points out, it is the embodiment of the cultural dispositions and

sensibilities which structure group behaviour. This simultaneously allows group members a mechanism for structuring their own personal social experience. As such, Craik (1994) sees particular resonance for the term in the context of fashion, the clothing of the body being a particularly important and active means of constructing and presenting a bodily self.

Bourdieu's vision of culture is therefore a theory of social practices (see Waters, 1994). Culture is separate from people as individuals and, as such, constrains people, and yet at the same time is constructed through human agency. Here then, Bourdieu (1984) is keen to assert that the position a person has in a structure does not, in itself generate a way of life. Members of a social group may act, but they do so as agents of social action, not as mirrors of the group to which they belong. An individual's symbolic activity, often expressed through modes of consumption is therefore relatively autonomous (see Bocock, 1993). Consumption therefore serves as a means of establishing, as opposed to merely expressing, variations between social groups. Human beings are motivated by the need to reproduce a collective pattern of preferences based on class demarcation. Cultural capital is crucial in this respect, in that different classes are qualified, educationally, to take advantage of different aspects of symbolic capital. The dominant classes therefore demonstrate their superiority through access to high culture. The habitus is reproduced between generations, and thereby generates the schemes by which cultural objects are classified and differentiated (Waters, 1994). Class differences are inscribed in individuals as distinctions in taste. In effect, an individual's social experience is structured by what the social group sees as being the legitimate way to do so, according to the correct classifications of taste.

The implication here, then, is that consumption amounts to a set of cultural resources that underpins consumers' everyday lives. Of course, access to these

resources depends upon access to economic resources. But the important issue here, is that the social and cultural *norm* is for the individual to aspire to them. In effect, consumption amounts to a bridge that links structure and agency. Structurally the consumer is bombarded with the suggestion that this or that commodity is what he or she wants. As an agent, the consumer is determined to use consumer goods in the most fulfilling ways possible. The tensions inherent in structure and agency are therefore no better expressed than in the realm of consumption. In order to understand the implications of this process it is necessary to delve deeper into how it is that the ideological implications of late consumer capitalism are expressed in everyday settings. These issues are hinted at in the work of the above three authors, but none of them fully conceptualise the ideological elements of consumerism. Social action, and it's relationship to consumer culture is what this thesis sets out to address. To this end the question of ideology will now be considered.

### **The question of ideology**

In order to develop a discussion around the relationship between ideology and identity I will briefly discuss Dick Hebdige's (1979) introduction to *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, which is particularly relevant, before considering the broader implications for an understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity, in the context of the structure and agency debate.

Hebdige describes ideology as lived relation. Drawing upon the work of Marx and Engels, Hebdige discusses how it is that the basis of the capitalist economic structure is hidden from the consciousness of the agents of production. In Marx's (1981) definition of ideology he argues that, "In the social production of their existence, men [*sic*] inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will" (pp. 20 - 21). However, as Hebdige points out this



should not necessarily imply a conscious masking operation on the part of specific individuals, social groups and institutions,

“On the contrary, ideology by definition thrives beneath consciousness. It is here, at the level of ‘normal common sense’, that ideological frames of reference are most firmly sedimented and most effective, because it is here that their ideological nature is most effectively concealed.” (Hebdige, 1979, p.11)

Hebdige goes on to suggest that ideology is essentially unconscious. An individual’s common sense does not reflect the way things are, but only how they fit into the existing way of the world. It’s the way in which ideology is taken for granted that makes it such a powerful social force.

The argument here is that ideology exists at an everyday common-sensical level. Ideology *defines* common sense, and as such cannot be talked about in isolation from everyday life. Neither, as Hebdige (1979) points out, should ideology be used in a crude Marxist sense, as mere ‘false consciousness’ in the sense that it is, in fact, *unconscious*. Hebdige argues that social relations and processes can only be appropriated by individuals through the forms in which they are presented to that individual. As such, human beings reproduce themselves through what Hebdige describes as a process of ‘naturalization’. Particular ways of organising the world appear to us, as individuals, to be universal, timeless and natural because social life, by its very nature, needs to be classifiable and meaningful. Thus, Hall (1977) talks about ‘maps of meaning’ which make certain meanings available and rule out others. The consequence of this is that ideology becomes an essential element of social life. In effect, ideology is lived experience: it pervades everyday life (see Althusser, 1984; Eagleton, 1994).

Ideology is therefore not merely a speculative theoretical system, but actively shape desires and wants. It works at the level of practical unconscious; and is lived, not merely thought. One of the most common and powerful ways in which ideology is enforced is through universalisation, in that values (e.g. consumerism) which are specific to a particular time are projected as values of humanity as a whole (Eagleton, 1994). The products of human social action are therefore reified and, as such, become seen as natural, external realities, which govern human behaviour .

Crucially, ideology does not exist as a straightforward codification of the general interest. Certain groups have more access to the dissemination of ideas in our society than others. It is in this sense that a dominant ideology exists which could be said to reflect dominant discourses, thereby charging such 'maps of meaning' with a potentially explosive significance. The interests of dominant classes and groups in society are therefore over-represented.

More recent approaches to the debate over ideology have questioned whether or not it is valid to even talk about ideology in a postmodern world. For instance Hawkes (1996) notes that the history of capitalism since 1945 is characterised by the dominance of the media of representation. Thus money, previously a symbol with which to exchange goods, becomes a mere representation, an end in itself that is no longer grounded in reality. Therefore, as I discussed in Chapter 2, imagery becomes the name of the day, in as much as what we as individuals perceive as the 'real' world is created for us, by the signifying systems we use (Hawkes, 1996). This, argues Hawkes, begs the question as to whether the concept of ideology itself, remains relevant. How can we, in fact, maintain a distinction between truth and falsehood if we believe in the power of representation to construct reality? If we accept the postmodern contention that independent consciousness is in itself illusory, then the notion of false

consciousness becomes redundant. I will consider this suggestion, in the context of consumerism, towards the end of this chapter.

### **Consumerism as ideology**

There could be an argument for suggesting that consumerism plays a powerful ideological role in contemporary society; that consumerism actively penetrates our everyday lives precisely because it can offer the symbolic attributes of commodities to consumers: that consumerism has, in effect, been universalised. Collectively shared values and beliefs are arguably invested in consumerism precisely because of what consumerism appears to offer at an individual level. At the extreme of this argument, Baudrillard (1988) goes as far as to argue that, “the isolated consumer is the carefully maintained illusion of the *ideological discourse* on consumption” (p.46), and that,

*“Production and Consumption are one and the same grand logical process in the expanded reproduction of the productive forces and of their control. This imperative, which belongs to the system, enters in an inverted form into the mentality, ethics, and everyday ideology, and that is its ultimate cunning: in the form of the liberation of needs, of individual fulfilment, of pleasure and of affluence etc.”* (p.50) [author’s emphasis]

Baudrillard probably goes a touch far in this analysis, in that he appears to deny any room for personal choice, meaning or agency. What he therefore develops is a rather one-dimensional conception of consumerism that bemoans a society that calls upon private property, profit and the associated power relationships as pillars of its existence, thereby promoting, above all else, the inalienable rights of the individual (see Fromm, 1976).

What seems to have emerged in recent decades is an historical sea-change whereby people have increasingly come to identify a sense of power and freedom as being located in aspects of life outside of work. According to Hall (1988) the ideological impact of a consumer culture can be traced back, at least in the short term, to the consumer boom of the 1950s, from which time the immediate lives of many working-class families were transformed. The new opportunities that consumption appeared to offer helped mould new habits, patterns and models of everyday life, significantly altering people's aspirations and expectations as to how it is they feel they should lead their everyday lives. What was emerging was a mode of life that was very much less constrained, thereby implanting itself in the minds of ordinary people as an essentially expansive system, both personally and in terms of the development of society as a whole (Hall, 1988).

Turner and Hill (1990) acknowledge the significance of high standards of living as perpetuating the dominant order. The key point here is that it is the ideological power of consumer sovereignty, despite any practical evidence that such sovereignty actually exists, which reinforces the dominance of powerful social groups. For instance, in her discussion of the consumer and education, McKenzie (1995) argues that by constantly flagging the importance of consumer sovereignty, successive Conservative governments since 1979 have ensured that education has become increasingly withdrawn from the sphere of public debate. McKenzie (1995) suggests that since 1979, and notably with the 1992 Education Act the government has nurtured unprecedented powers over education and yet, by promoting a veneer of consumer sovereignty, it has become possible for the government to be less and less specific about the actualities of policy implementation.

In effect, consumer sovereignty provides an ideological impetus which is enough to legitimise centralised power, but which, ironically, undermines the very sovereignty that it purports to extend. By focusing on the intuitive advantages supposedly inherent in consumer choice, and by ignoring the limitations of such choice, consumers arguably, have no critical base by which they can challenge the system. As such it is in the interests of powerful social groups, including those in government to weaken the position of education within the public sphere. In this context, there might well be an argument for suggesting that the political rhetoric of enterprise culture actually amounts to an ideological disguise for other political projects such as the restoration of the fortunes of capital accumulation and the strengthening of the powers of the state. Consumer capitalism, then, is not emancipatory at all; it merely offers the ideological gift of appearing as such (Keat, 1994).

Abercrombie (1990) argues that it is unwise to place too much explanatory weight on any conception of consumerism in that not only are there cultural shifts at stake here, but also shifts in balances of authority. The suggestion here is that it is precisely because such shifts have occurred that an analysis of consumerism becomes paramount to any debate about the impact of a dominant ideology. In the same collection, Turner (1990), points out that human beings are bound *together*, and *to* the dominant social order, by everyday economic realities. The paradox of consumerism is that it offers a vision of personal freedom through economic means; it offers the opportunity for individuals to take advantage of their own means for extravagant display, and yet maintains a dominant order that constrains personal liberty. Developing this point, Bauman (1988) notes how it is that consumer conduct steadily moves into the simultaneous position of the cognitive and moral focus of life, amounting to what is, in effect, the integrative bond of society,

“Consumer freedom has moved in - first perhaps as a squatter, but more and more as a legitimate resident. It now takes over the crucial role of the link which fastens together the lifeworlds of the individual agents and the purposeful rationality of the system.” (p. 807)

There is a tendency, as Thompson (1990) notes, for debates over ideology to be over-simplistic in that they underestimate the complex ways in which symbolic forms actively serve to maintain relations of domination. Thompson’s suggestion that in order to understand such issues, it is important to address the ways in which individuals (differentially situated in the social order), make sense of particular symbolic forms and how these symbolic forms are produced, received and understood, is an insightful one.

Lee (1993) argues that as well as being recognised as material and symbolic resources for the reproduction of everyday life, consumer goods should be referred to as ‘texts’ *inviting* “certain preferred forms of reading and decoding which aim to reproduce dominant social relations” (p. 49). In this sense Lee (1993) captures why it is that consumption is an invaluable focus for social scientists interested in the relationship between structure and agency,

“For if consumption is simultaneously the touchstone of the political economy, underwritten by commercial logic which places the realisation of surplus-value at its core, as well as the site upon which popular pleasures are produced, often as a result of the unforeseen uses and meanings given to goods by consumers in their everyday domestic life, then it is clear that we need to construct a theoretical model of consumption which is sensitive to both its economic and cultural dimensions.” (p. 49)

Hawkes (1996) considers the relationship between consumerism and ideology in a postmodern world, and notes that the rise of capital and the free market to pre-eminence, cannot be denied. Hawkes goes on to suggest that though postmodernism actively tries to present itself as a radical 'oppositional' mode of thought, the way in which it simultaneously denies the validity of 'totalizing' explanations blinds many of its adherents to the ideological power of consumerism. Indeed, as Hawkes notes, postmodern approaches to consumerism all too often hover between denying that capital underlies the experience of the postmodern world, and arguing that even if it does, consumerism is more remarkable for the opportunities it provides than those that it forecloses. Ultimately, Hawkes (1996) suggests that by maintaining this position postmodernists themselves serve an ideological function. By propagating a picture of the human being as a desiring machine governed by one desire after another, postmodernism actively props up the status quo,

"One of the most venerable conceptions of ideology is as a system of thought which propagates systematic falsehood in the selfish interest of the powerful and malign dominating a particular historical era. By that definition, postmodernism is nothing more than the ideology of consumer capitalism." (p. 12)

In this sense, Hawkes (1996) discussion of the work of Debord (1967) and Baudrillard (1981) is of particular interest. Debord (1967) considers the complete dominance of representation, of the 'spectacle' over 'reality'. In a consumer society exchange value becomes more important, more real, than use-value and products are produced in order to be sold, rather than to be used, as such. In effect, as Hawkes (1996) notes, consumer goods have symbolic significance, and it is this symbolism that determines what goes on in the material world. The dominance of commodification in a postmodern world is therefore said to

impose an illusory significance upon the real world. The thing-in-itself is obscured by "it's form of appearance" (Hawkes, 1996, p. 170). Human life itself, becomes dominated by its simultaneously objectified and symbolic appearance, which is characterised by capital. In effect, commodities become fetishised and therefore acquire an active ideological power. But interestingly as Hawkes (1996) points out, Debord (1967) actually argues that the triumph of commodification actually renders the notion of false consciousness obsolete. We are faced with, "...the materialization of ideology. Society has become what ideology already was" (Debord, 1967, p. 217). A way of thinking that is substantively harmless has actually become rooted in a real material situation.

Alternatively, Baudrillard (1981) describes ideology as "the very operation of exchange value itself" (p. 167). Baudrillard discusses how signs have become divorced from their referents because exchange-value has triumphed over use-value (see Hawkes, 1996). Baudrillard (1981) therefore sees ideology as operating on both a psychic and social level, in as much as "desire is abstracted and atomized into needs, in order to make it homogenous with the means of satisfaction and thus to multiply consummativity" (p. 83). Thus, Baudrillard proposes that 'consummativity' replaces 'productivity' as the organising principle of consumer capitalism. Essentially, the human soul is manipulated in order to maintain the smooth functioning of the economy. The individual can no longer be independent, in that he or she has become, "an ideological structure... The individual is nothing but the subject thought in economic terms" (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 133).

I will return to the question postmodern ideology in Chapter 10. What is clear, at this stage, is that the relationship between consumption and ideology is an immensely complicated one. The ideological implications of consumption cannot be fully explained through either a top/down or bottom/up approach to the



structure and agency question. What is called for is a 'structurational' conception of consumption. Indeed, as Mead (1934) argues, "The individual constitutes society as much as society constitutes the individual" (p. 15). Ideology is as psychological as it is sociological. As Dittmar (1992) notes, human beings are simultaneously creators and products of the social world and as such identity is part of each person's subjective reality, but can only be so, in as much as it is also constituted in a cultural context. In the final analysis as Dawe (1978) notes,

"In every testimony to the experience of the dehumanizing pressure of modern industrial society, there is also a testimony to a contrary sense of self, of personal identity, of being human; of what it is or might be like to be in control of our own lives, to act in and upon the world, to be active human agents." (p. 364)

### **Consumption as constraining *and* enabling**

The overall implication here is that neither a structural or agentic emphasis is sufficient in explaining the psycho-social impact of consumerism, in that neither position comes to terms with the dualism of social experience. Both, in fact, oversimplify the impact of consumption because of their overly-rigid conceptions of the marketplace (see Warde's 1990a discussion of Saunders in this light).

In this respect, Dawe's (1978) thoughts, regarding the dualism of social thought between methodological collectivism and individualism, are particularly illuminating. He argues that social thought has itself developed on the grounds of an opposition between a sociology of social system and a sociology of social action, which in turn is in direct opposition to the dualism of everyday life. In effect, Dawes argues that the time has come to rise above these 'two sociologies' and, that, rather than considering in which ways we are individual beings and in

which ways we are social beings, we should, in fact, be asking, "How... we communally provide for which versions of individuality" (p. 410).

What is being suggested here is that any understanding of consumption needs to be fuelled by an investment in both the ceaseless activity of human agency *and* the active communality of the production of the social world (Dawe's, 1978). The theoretical insights of both Simmel and Bourdieu are useful in this respect. However, the lessons concerning work which recognises the inter-dependant nature of the relationship between structure and agency remain to be learnt. In this sense, I agree with Lee (1993), who notes that what is important about consumer goods is that they, in fact, lead a double life in that they appear, on the one hand, to be agents of social control and yet, on the other, the objects used by consumers in order to actively construct their own cultures. Whilst, for instance, the advertising industry proffers preferred readings of its output, which are aimed, as Lee argues, to reproduce dominant social relations, consumer goods also provide important material and symbolic resources,

"In essence, the culture of consumption is never simply a mere symbolic echo or the purely functional realisation of product positioning by advertising and marketing strategies. Similarly, the market is never a simple reflection of consumer tastes and needs, or for that matter an institution which slavishly follows autonomous or sovereign cultural practices." (Lee, 1993, p. 49)

As Bocoock (1993) argues, there is no straightforward answer to the question as to whether consumption is essentially good or bad, or even both. What I want to suggest however, is that by either adopting a position of consumption as manipulation, or consumption as liberation, the subtleties of the consumer experience are glossed over. In this respect Giddens' (1976; 1984; 1991)

structuration theory approach is beneficial in that it attempts to grapple with such subtleties.

The problem, here, is how best to establish a research programme that brings together both structural and agentic factors. The ideology of consumerism is expressed, in whatever fashion, most forcibly in the context of common sense and everyday life. The fact that this ideology is obscured by personal meaning, arguably makes it especially powerful and worthy of particularly sociological consideration. Cultural constructions of identity are, to an extent, dependant upon a process by which the individual constructs and negotiates meaning through the dominant representations at his or her disposal. Consumption is arguably the most influential and ubiquitous of all dominant representations. What is interesting about consumption (like structure) in this context, is that it both constrains *and* enables. It therefore appears reasonable to accept Giddens' (1991) proposition that consumers actively and creatively interpret the process of commodification as it impinges on their lives. That is, though structural influences undoubtedly have a fundamental role to play in establishing what common sensical conceptions of consumption predominate, such influences are inevitably subject to individual negotiation in everyday contexts. In effect, consumption lies at the intersection of structure and agency. In the following four empirical chapters the implications of this contention for the construction of young people's identities will be considered.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Methodology**

The intention of this thesis is to use empirical research as a means of generating theoretical advances which might begin to enlighten the sociological understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity. The previous four chapters have provided a contextual framework from which it should be possible to begin to construct an overall research question. At this stage, it is therefore necessary to highlight the limitations of the sociological approaches to the debates I have discussed up to now, thereby identifying a rationale for this research as a whole.

#### **Framing the research question**

The first issue to consider in framing my overall research question centres on the issue of identity. Quite simply, what is identity and how is it constructed? This was an issue I considered in depth in Chapter 3. The main point to draw out of this chapter is that identity, though associated at a simplistic level, with the individual, is actually culturally *and* socially constructed. In effect, identity is psycho-social. The individual does not construct his or her identity in isolation, but uses the cultural resources around him or her to negotiate a sense of identity which is legitimised by the social group, who use cultural resources as a means of deciding what is and is not legitimate in this context. In light of the discussion in Chapter 2, concerning the increasing cultural role that consumption plays in contemporary society, the implication here is that perhaps consumption is, in itself, a cultural resource deployed by consumers in the construction of their identities.

I want to propose here then, that consumption is, indeed, “social, relational and active rather than private, atomic or passive” (Appadurai 1986, p.31). The meanings of goods are far more complex than a superficial understanding of their value; or a reading of them, as texts can allow. What is important is how they are used, who they are used by, in what cultural contexts they are used, and why. The actual everyday use of consumption is very much a cultural issue and as such it is important to establish some conception of what is meant by the term ‘culture’. In this sense, the following definitions are of particular value. Describing culture in terms of “inherited artefacts, goods, technical process, ideas, habits and values” Malinowski (1944) goes on to argue that culture,

“ is the integral whole consisting of the implements and consumer goods, of constitutional charters for the various social groupings, of human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs... the essential fact of culture as we live it and experience it scientifically, is the organisation of human beings into permanent groups” ( p. 17).

Equally important, in this regard, is Firth’s definition of culture as,

“the component of accumulated resources, immaterial as well as material, which a people inherit, employ, transmute, add to and transmit; it is all learned behaviour which has been socially acquired.” (Firth, 1971, p. 27)

What is important about these particular definitions is their emphasis on the *learned* nature of culture. The sociological significance of consumption arises out of the fact that it is quite possibly the most prominent resource by which people, (and in particular young people in the context of peer group interaction, as discussed in Chapter 4), learn about their everyday environment, and therefore has considerable potential as what might be described as a cultural ‘adhesive’.

This thesis intends to address what implications such potential might have for the construction of identities.

In this context, there may well be an argument for suggesting that the experience of young people is especially important in terms of identity construction. This point is particularly well expressed by Yardley and Honess (1987),

“The changes heralded in childhood point to adolescents’ newly emerging capacity to construct rather than simply ‘find’ meanings. This, in conjunction with considerable biological, social and personal change, underlies the continuing significance of the ‘teenage’ years for the consolidation of a sense of self.” (Yardley and Honess, 1987, pp. xv - xvi)

As in Chapter 3, what I am suggesting here is that though identities are clearly constructed throughout the life-cycle, young people experience a period in their lives when issues concerning identity ‘work’ become especially important to them. This is a period when young people struggle to come to terms with who it is that they actually are. Young people attempt to make some sense of all the changes they are experiencing through the construction of meaning. They, in effect, attempt to construct their own meanings rather than accept those laid down for them by their parents. However, the suggestion, raised in Chapter 4, is that the risky nature of young people’s experience is such that they need meaning to be corroborated socially and culturally before they can have the confidence to construct some sense of identity.

What is equally intriguing is the common-sensical argument that consumption appears to play a prominent role in young people’s lives, and that young people are especially ‘vulnerable’ to the wares offered by a consumer culture. The question is how far that this role imparts some influence on the construction of

young people's identities? What I am suggesting here, is that before the relationship between consumption and identity can be fully explicated, it might well be beneficial to develop some understanding of this relationship in the period of people's lives when consumption is generally perceived to be at it's most influential.

However, the overriding hurdle that sociological approaches to the relationship between consumption and identity still need to overcome is the failure of research to prioritise *routine* cultural aspects of consumption. This is particularly true from an investigative point of view, in that postmodern conceptions of consumption, as I suggested in Chapter 2, have captured the sociological imagination, but are quite simply inadequate in as much as they do not consider the situated active ways in which consumers actually consume. More specifically, consumption represents what Holland (1977) describes as a 'mediation phenomena', an important focus for debate that apparently falls in the disciplinary void between sociology and psychology. Precisely because of the extent of both its psychological and sociological impact in cultural contexts, the psycho-social impact of consumption has been lost amidst the vagaries of disciplinary tradition.

I should point out that the above limitations are not merely problems confined to the social scientific approaches to consumption, but to social science more generally. I would argue that the problem here arises from the inability, of sociologists in particular, to come to terms with the grounded nature of the everyday cultural experience, which in itself highlights the psycho-social nature of everyday life. In this regard, some of the comments made by Fine (1979) are especially pertinent,

"Sociologists have had considerable difficulty in analyzing the position of culture in society because of a general unwillingness to examine culture in its behavioural context. Culture, like all aspects of social life, is situationally grounded and, thus, sociologists should bracket grand theorizing about culture in favour of examining it in situ." (p.744)

As a means of establishing some conception of the significance of everyday meanings to sociology, the work of deCerteau (1984) is of particular interest. DeCerteau (1984) focuses on the conflictual nature of everyday life. He emphasises, as Fiske (1989) notes, the potential in everyday life for popular resistance. He therefore sees consumption as far more than a merely economic by-product of production, but rather as "part... of the repertory with which users carry out the operations of their own" (DeCerteau, 1984, p. 31). As such, it can again be argued that consumption has psychological as well as sociological significance. In this regard what is crucial about consumption is what consumers make of what it is that they consume (see Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). It is not the products themselves that matter, but the ways in which those products are used and the meanings which are applied to those products.

The key to understanding the relationship between consumption and identity, I would suggest, therefore lies in an understanding of consumer *meanings*. Indeed, the previous four chapters all appear to point towards one overriding limitation characteristic of sociological approaches to the consumption question. The failure to understand the significance of consumption to the contemporary life experience is primarily, I contend, the direct result of a neglect for the personal meanings with which consumers endow the goods that they consume. There exist very few attempts (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, being a notable exception) which address, directly, the sorts of issues that I have raised in



this chapter. The literature has manifestly failed to address what it is to *experience* consumption in everyday life. Those approaches that have considered the meanings endowed in consumer goods, have tended either to read off such meanings from texts or artefacts without recourse to their situated construction (e.g. Fiske, 1989) or have over-emphasised individual agency (e.g. Willis, 1990).

Consumption can only effectively be understood in terms of reception, and the meanings incorporated into the ways in which consumers receive the goods that they consume. It must also be said that consumption is more important than a simple consideration of its conflictual nature. Its more routine aspects are of equal, if not more, interest, in that they appear to provide a foundation for consumers everyday social experience. It seems likely then, that Furby's (1991) discussion of the way forward in the academic study of consumption is especially pertinent, in that she suggests what is necessitated is a careful marriage of empirical research and theory in order to present coherent analyses of consumer processes that address 'big' questions. One such question is the relationship between identity and consumption.

My empirical, as well as theoretical, focus, here then, is on the construction of consumer meaning in everyday settings. In this sense, I accept Fine's (1979) prioritisation of interaction,

"Culture is a construction based upon the consensual meaning system of members; it comprises the interactional products that result from a verbal and behavioral representation of that meaning system." (p. 744)

This research will therefore attempt to address such meanings within the context of lived experience. In this sense Bovone's (1989) suggestion that the concept of identity is synonymous with 'personal meaning' is a useful one. Identity, in as

much as it is produced during interaction, as I argued in Chapter 3, is also a system of meanings. In contemporary consumer culture those meanings often appear at a common-sensical level to be invested in consumer goods. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue that, "consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape" (p. 57). The role of consumption in contemporary society may therefore be described as facilitative, in that it performs an active and interactive cultural role. This thesis intends to address how far consumption is in fact, an interactive cultural experience, and how the significance of that experience is expressed through personal meanings.

### **Aims and objectives**

The key focus of this thesis is meaning endowment amongst consumers in routine everyday settings, and by implication the broader social scientific understanding of the everyday ideological impact of consumption practices. To this end, at this point I want to focus on the specific aims and objectives of the thesis as a whole:

- 1) To investigate the meanings with which 'young people', generally regarded as the most 'vulnerable' age group to consumerism, endow consumer goods, and by doing so, present a test-case according to which it is possible to investigate how far individuals are purely passive recipients of consumerism.
- 2) Thus, in turn, to develop some conception of how far consumerism can be regarded as the outcome of the wishes and demands of consumers in light of broader theoretical debates surrounding structure, agency, and ideology.

3) And by implication to develop methodologies which can be used to address the role that consumption may, or may not have, in the construction of young people's identities.

### **Methodological approach**

Bearing in mind the above arguments a triangulated empirical approach to the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people was developed which incorporated a three-stage research model deploying the following research methods:

- 1) A series of focus group interviews (incorporating techniques derived from Personal Construct Psychology).
- 2) A participant observation in a sports shop.
- 3) A Consumer Meanings Questionnaire.

### **Can we ask why?**

Before I go on to discuss, in some detail, the rationale behind the adoption of the above methods, I want to consider, briefly, a methodological issue that comes hand in hand with my intention of addressing consumer meanings and one that runs throughout my research. What I need to consider is how far consumer meanings can actually be tapped by asking consumers themselves what those meanings are. The problem here, as Marsh (1982) points out, and as I suggested in Chapter 5, is that human experience is not characterised solely by free will. There are all sorts of social structures and pressures, acting on peoples everyday lives. Indeed, as Marsh points out, "people may make history, they may exercise choice, but they cannot choose the conditions, the avenues of possibilities open to them" (p. 100). In this respect, the work of Henry (1971) is important. Henry considers how far it is valid for marketers to ask consumers in a direct fashion

about their motives for purchasing particular products. He argues, in fact, that the reasons consumers give for their actions tend to be post hoc rationalisations,

“It is a human tendency for people to ascribe to the products they normally use, as to the countries, states or towns in which they live, any virtues which may be under discussion.” (Henry, 1971, p. 199)

However, in arguing this point, Henry goes on to suggest that the word “why” is multi-dimensional, and as such can cover consumer motivations induced by external factors, personal factors with a high level of generality, and more peculiarly unique personal factors. He argues, in particular, that this latter category of meaning is of no interest to the market researcher. However, it is precisely because consumer meanings express sociological, personal, yet generalisable *and* unique personal aspects of the individual’s relationship to consumption, as I argued in Chapter 5, that asking consumers why they purchase a good is a rich source of data for the *sociologist*. Henry (1971) argues that,

“...it is not possible to ascertain the motives which underlie an informant’s behaviour by the simple process of asking him [*sic*]. He usually has no idea what his real motives are, and even when he has he is unable to assess them quantitatively.” (p. 311)

The point here is that the needs of the market researcher are different to those of the sociologist. My argument is that consumer meanings are an invaluable foundation upon which the significance of consumption in people’s lives can begin to be assessed. As Marsh (1992) notes, actors *do* know a great deal about their own behaviour and we should not eschew their insights. Rather we need to treat those insights critically and with circumspection. Ultimately the pros to be

gained by addressing personal meanings far outweigh the cons. As such, as Marsh (1982) points out,

“The best sociological questions are those which aim to investigate the conscious, the subjective, the creative aspects of human action and to delimit the extent to which they are the key determinants of a given outcome.” (p. 100)

## **Rationale**

### **i) Triangulation**

Before I go on to consider the specific circumstances in which the above phases of my research were developed I want to briefly explain the importance of a triangulated approach to the above research questions. Triangulation can be defined as the cumulative use of different methods to compensate for the biases of any single method. One of the most authoritative discussions of triangulation is that provided by Denzin (1970) who argues, in his discussion about the relationship between sociology and research that,

“multiple methods must be used in every investigation, since no method is ever free of rival causal factors, (and thus seldom leads to completely sound causal propositions)... or can never completely reveal all of the relevant features of empirical reality necessary for a theory’s test or development.” (p. 27)

Denzin therefore goes on to discuss what he describes as a ‘multiple-paths-to-theory-approach’ which allows the researcher to consider a research question from a diversity of angles. What therefore emerges is a firmly grounded empirical approach that is comparative in nature. By adopting a triangulated approach the danger inherent in single method approaches, namely of

misinterpreting the unique instances of concepts, can be avoided. By examining his or her problem from as many methodological perspectives as possible verified theories can be generated. In effect, by using triangulated measurement it should be possible to pinpoint the value of a phenomena more accurately, through the adoption of different methodological viewpoints (see Brewer and Hunter, 1989). As such, the problem with all research methods, argues Denzin, is that used individually they reveal peculiar elements of symbolic reality; they provide the researcher with a particular orientation. Indeed,

“Methods are like the kaleidoscope - depending on how they are approached, held, and acted toward, different observations will be revealed. This is not to imply that reality has the shifting qualities of the colored prism, but that it too is an object that moves and will not permit one interpretation to be stamped upon it.” (Denzin, 1970, p. 299)

Perhaps the main benefit of this triangulated approach then, as Robson (1993) notes, is as a means of reducing inappropriate certainty, that is the idea that the delusion resulting from a researcher believing that one method provides him or her with a ‘true’ result. Robson claims that this is particularly true of qualitative data where the trustworthiness of the data is always of some concern. Triangulation provides a means of validating a researchers conclusions through mutual confirmation. In this context, there is much to be said for combining qualitative and quantitative research methods (see Bryman, 1988). Robson (1993) goes on to talk about the enhancement of interpretability that can be provided by complementary approaches. For instance, the qualitative findings collected during my participant observation are complemented and thereby reinforced by statistical data that came out of the questionnaire phase of my research. I have already discussed how consumer meanings have continued to elude social scientific research. In this sense, it is doubly important that triangulated research

methods are applied in order to construct as rounded an analysis of the nature of such meanings, as possible. In the next three chapters I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the research techniques I adopted. However, the intention is that the individual disadvantages that I discuss are more than compensated for by the cumulative advantages of triangulation.

## **ii) Grounded theory**

During my research I attempted to generate theory from data, in the tradition of Glaser and Strauss' (1968) conception of grounded theory. In this sense a fundamental methodological concern of this thesis is that theory generation is intimately involved in the process of research rather than the theory itself 'manipulating' the research process (see Blaikie, 1993). This very much complements the notion of triangulation. As such,

"Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research. " (Glaser and Strauss, 1968, p.6)

My research therefore reflects Glaser and Strauss' (1968) call for inductive, as opposed to deductive, research. I should, however, acknowledge the fact that Glaser and Strauss (1968) tend to idealise the relationship between data and theory and thereby make the research process appear to be more straightforward than it can ever, in fact, be. As such, during the course of this research I refrain from religiously following the detailed principles discussed by Glaser and Strauss. Rather, this research attempts to develop pragmatic theoretical insights into the relationship between consumption and identity; insights that are garnered from empirical efforts to address the cultural contexts in which young people endow consumer goods.

Such pragmatism is reflected in the way in which theoretical insights develop out of the empirical insights that are discussed in the following three chapters. The results gathered from the sources I discuss do not stand alone, but amount to one part of an overall picture. Only in conjunction, do the following three chapters claim to tell us anything significant about the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people. It is in this sense that this research is triangulated. I attempt to come to terms with my research question, by addressing that question from various empirical angles. I therefore use different sources (i.e. informants), methods, and theories, as Denzin (1988) recommends. Decisions were made as to what direction the research would develop according to consideration of the findings gathered at each stage. By conducting a multi-method enquiry it has therefore been possible to begin to come to terms with the pragmatic everyday ways in which young people endow consumer goods. It is my contention that research into the identity and consumption question must be equally pragmatic if the psycho-social significance of the meanings with which individuals endow consumer goods in a cultural context, are to be fully realised.

### **iii) Development of the research**

I will now briefly explain the circumstances in which the triangulated research tools identified above were judged to be an appropriate means of considering the grounded relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people.

First, having conducted an extensive review of the literature, I made the strategic decision that it was important to seek to understand the meanings which consumers invested in their consumer goods, and as such came to the conclusion that, potentially, the richest source for such data would emanate from the experience of young people, for the reasons discussed above. I decided that focus



group interviews represented the most pro-active way in which I could tap such experience. Indeed, noting that many commentators, Veblen (1994) and Bourdieu (1984) included, stress the social and comparative underpinnings of the consuming experience, I felt that this experience would be best reproduced in a relaxed interview setting where respondents could discuss amongst themselves issues relating to the relationship between consumption and identity. The appropriateness of this particular research tool was emphasised later in the research process, during which time the significance of the peer group on consumption habits became increasingly apparent. In Chapter 7, I will discuss the specifics of these interviews in more detail. At this stage, however, I should at least point out that these interviews included some use of techniques associated with Personal Construct Psychology, as a further means of addressing specifically the meanings that lay behind the superficial consumption experience. This provided me with a further perspective on the psycho-social role of consumption in everyday life.

Having conducted my focus group interviews, it became evident that a number of themes were emerging which highlighted at least some form of relationship between consumption and identity. One of those themes was the social and cultural nature of consumption; another the significance of brands to young people (see Chapter 7). In order to come to terms with the meanings with which young consumers endowed the goods they consume, and thereby shed some light on what actually constitutes the relationship between consumption and identity, it was felt necessary to consider the above issues in a naturalistic setting. It was decided that the best means of achieving this goal was through a participant observation which focused upon young people's consumption patterns, and thus, in turn, upon the influences which underpinned the decision to purchase. This was felt necessary in order that my research might be as naturalistic as possible, something that was only partially possible within the

context of my focus group interviews. During the course of my focus groups, training shoes were regularly mentioned by my respondents and, as such, could be identified as a quintessential article of youth consumption, particularly worthy of examination. It became clear that trainers, like many other consumer goods, were loaded with symbolic significance far beyond their utilitarian use as footwear. A sports shop, and in particular a sports shop specialising in training shoes, was therefore identified as a natural place in which to observe young people at the point at which they were considering the meanings they had for particular items, and whether or not such meanings justified a purchase. I therefore worked, over a period of ten weeks, as a shop assistant in a branch of Foot Locker. This allowed me access to the meanings that lay directly behind the immediate purchase of a symbolically significant consumer good. In this context, I was able to consider some of the issues that arose during my focus groups in a social space in which consumers routinely endowed the goods at their disposal with the meanings that they deemed appropriate. The specifics of this aspect of my research will be discussed in Chapter 8.

After having collected a substantial amount of first-hand data which had addressed the application of consumer meanings in a specific social space, it was deemed necessary to consider the issues that had arisen in the context of the first two phases of my research in relation to a broader analysis of the meanings which young people endowed in consumer goods. Both my focus group interviews and my participant observation had given me considerable 'clues' as to the important issues influencing the construction of young people's consumer meanings. It was felt, at that stage, that these issues should be examined more closely in the context of a larger sample. I therefore constructed a focused shopping questionnaire which would address such concerns. I felt that a questionnaire would provide me with the most efficient and productive means of collecting a larger sample of data which sort to address what, up to now, had

been conceived of as qualitative issues. As such, it was felt that by conducting a questionnaire which attempted to bring together all the significant themes that had emerged during the previous two phases of my research, concerning meaning endowment in consumer goods, I would be able to make a more authoritative triangulated assessment of the role of consumption in identity constructions amongst young people. I therefore chose to focus the questionnaire on the meanings which young consumers had invested in specific pleasurable goods which they had recently purchased. The specifics of this, the final phase of my research, will be discussed in Chapter 9.

#### **iv) The sample**

Before I move on, in Chapters 7, 8 and 9, to consider the empirical foundations upon which this thesis is built, I want to briefly discuss the sample that emerged out of this triangulated model. The samples used for each of the above three phases of the research are 'purposive' (see Robson, 1993). That is, the principle according to which I developed my research, and the sample within that research, emerged pragmatically according to the perceived needs of the research as it progressed, and according to what I, as the researcher, judged as being the most appropriate means of addressing specific research questions and areas of research interest, as they arose. At the first stage I decided that my priority was the need to address the meanings with which *young people* endowed consumer goods. This follows the suggestion in Chapter 4, and above, that youth experience amounts to a particularly salient period in terms of identity construction, and that at a common-sensical consumer goods, at least, appear, to have an important role in constructing young people's everyday experience. In turn, I wanted to consider the proposition that if young people are the age group most 'vulnerable' to consumerism, notably through advertising, then as a result, their identities are also most likely to be constructed, in some way, through consumption. I also wanted to deal with the historical argument that long term

historical change may have resulted in consumption becoming an increasingly significant aspect of people's lives. It was therefore logical for me to use an age range of respondents who are not only experiencing a period of their lives when identity issues are especially pressing, but who are doing so in an historical period where arguably consumer goods are increasing accessible and formative. As such, my intention here is not to discuss the role of consumption on identities across the life span, but across the life experiences of young people.

My sample also took the question of gender into account, in that I interviewed equal numbers of young men and women at the first stage. However, in the second, young men were more frequent visitors to the sports shop than young women. My questionnaire sample included an girls school which counter-balanced this gender dimension in favour of females. The specifics of the process by which I developed my samples, and what constituted those samples, will be discussed in more detail during the individual empirical chapters. All I need do at this point, is reiterate the fact that my sample was purposive and that at each stage of the research process a sample was approached which reflected the need of my overall research question.

#### **v) Research ethics**

The final issue I want to deal with in this section is to do with the ethical implications of the data I gleaned from the above samples. These questions will also be raised from time to time during my actual empirical chapters. As Robson (1993) notes, a crucial issue is the balance between knowledge gained and participants' rights of privacy, dignity and self-determination.

In this context, Rees (1991) identifies several ethical issues relevant to this research: whether or not certain areas of private behaviour or methods of enquiry should be off limits as far as researchers are concerned; whether or not the

researcher should be completely open with his or her respondents about the nature of research; and whether researchers should prioritise in their minds the legacy they leave for future researchers, perhaps from the same institution, who may wish to undertake research in the same location. All these issues influenced my research in varying degrees.

The first question to raise is whether or not I should, ethically speaking, be addressing consumer meanings in the first place. The data which I will discuss in the next three chapters is personal in the sense that it addresses the personal investments that young people have to what it is they consume and why they consume it. However, I did not perceive it to be unethical nor immoral for me to address such an issue, in that such meanings are not of a personal enough nature for their reporting to be of any sort of harm to the individual. In any case, this potential danger was offset by complete anonymity and confidentiality during all three stages of the research. Hence the use of pseudonyms throughout this text.

I was not completely open with my respondents in the sense that in the first phase they were unaware exactly what the focus of my research was. This, as I suggest in Chapter 7, was necessary in order that my respondents did not over-emphasise the role of consumption in their lives. They were informed, in fact, that I was looking into the relationship between young people's lifestyles and identities, but no more. What might be said to be somewhat misleading, as I will discuss in Chapter 8, was my participant observation, during which respondents were unaware of the research I was conducting. All I will say, at this stage, is that the material I collected during my participant observation was not sensitive in any sense, and I therefore decided that the benefits gleaned from this aspect of the research far out-weighed what was a limited ethical issue. My observation needed to be covert in order that I might collect the richest data possible. In this respect I agree with Gans' (1962) contention that,

“If the researcher is completely honest with people about his activities, they will try to hide actions and attitudes they consider undesirable, and so will be dishonest. Consequently, the researcher must be dishonest to get honest data. (p. 46)

Some limited ‘deception’ was necessary in order to get at data not obtainable through other means.

Finally, the third point raised by Rees (1991), regarding paving the way for future research, was dealt with by maintaining good working relationships with contacts (either college teachers, lecturers or shop managers and assistants) at each of the three stages. This included posting letters of thanks at appropriate times, and as far as the sports shop was concerned, visiting outwith normal working hours, in order to maintain contact with my fellow shop assistants.

In the next three chapters I will consider the issues raised above, in more detail. By doing so I will construct a basis from which I can consider the psycho-social significance of the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Focus Group Interviews**

#### **Methodological issues**

In Chapter 6, I discussed some of the broad methodological issues that underlay this thesis. In this chapter, I want to reflect, in more detail, upon the first stage of the overall research process, namely my focus group interviews. In what follows, I will therefore discuss why it was that focus group interviews (which incorporate Personal Construct Psychology) were seen to be conducive to answering the research questions that were originally highlighted in Chapter 6, moving on, subsequently, to discuss the actual substance of my findings.

#### **Focus groups as a tool for psycho-social research**

Though focus group interviews have their roots in sociology, the vast majority of current applications are found in marketing. In this respect, considering the focus of my research is consumption, focus groups have a particular appeal. In effect, the decision was made to implement a research tool synonymous with marketing, which uses focus groups, primarily, to ascertain what goods consumers want; in order to find out what those goods actually *mean* to young consumers.

Krueger (1988) defines a focus group as,

“a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment...

The discussion is relaxed, comfortable and often enjoyable for participants

as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion." (p.18)

In the context of this research, focus group interviews offer several advantages. Above all, they allow for both the investigation of what young people think about the significance of consumption to the formation of their identities, and they provide the opportunity to address *why* it is that they think as they do. In this respect, focus group interviews are more appealing than individual interviews in that they allow for discussion of the issues at hand, and participants, as Morgan (1988) notes, can become aware of their own perspectives when confronted by active disagreements or consensus within the group as a whole. In addition, the contribution of one participant may spark off the ideas of another. Respondents may also find it easier to communicate those ideas in a group context, rather than in the arguably more intimidating setting of a one-to-one interview. In effect, the focus group is able to find common ground, according to which individuals can relate their own experiences. This grounding of communication in the "human tendency to discuss issues and ideas in groups" (Sink, 1991, p. 198), gives focus groups a considerable degree of external validity.

Focus group interviews, therefore, take account of a theme that runs through the very heart of this thesis. That is individual attitudes and perceptions cannot be taken in isolation. As Krueger (1988) suggests, we are all the product of our environment and are influenced by the people around us. Society cannot be understood without the individual and the individual cannot be understood without society (see Chapter 5). One-to-one interviews, often neglect this fact, in that they have an implicit assumption that individuals know how they feel and form their opinions in isolation. By highlighting the exchange of ideas that occur in a focus group setting it is possible to address, to a far more complex degree, the extent of human motivation. By this method some progress can be made



towards understanding what Schutz (1967) describes as 'intersubjectivity', the ordinary descriptions of reality shared by actors. Focus groups cannot provide all the answers but they go some way in addressing the limitations of more traditional methods.

A significant benefit of the focus group is its potential as a non-threatening source of data. A conscious effort was made to ensure that my focus groups were as relaxed as possible, in order to encourage all respondents to contribute to the overall discussion. As such, my role was very much a facilitating one, in order that the direction of the conversation was determined as much by the participants as possible. In this respect, the way in which focus groups were used in this research were somewhat more flexible than the way in which they are described by Krueger (1988) above. This reflects the concern that ethnographic material should remain as faithful to the perceptions of subjects as possible and thereby avoid the researcher having too much of an authoritative role in the discussion (Denzin 1988). My role then, was to prevent the discussion becoming irrelevant to my research questions. Though carefully planned, the focus groups became a rich source of data as a direct result of this flexibility, and as such were not constrained by a particular list of questions that *had* to be dealt with. Though the pre-amble I present in Appendix 2 was followed closely in order to ensure uniformity between focus groups, the actual questions were merely used as a guide.

Focus groups undoubtedly have many qualities, particularly in the context of a piece of research that places so much emphasis on individual meanings and the social context in which those meanings are ascribed. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the limitations inherent in using this type of approach. Perhaps the most significant problem with focus groups is the danger of 'social loafing' or conformity, that is the danger of individual respondents contributing less, as

certain individuals in the group carry the group discussion (see Asch, 1951). Focus group interviews might also be criticised for incorporating what are essentially unnatural settings as Morgan (1988) points out. Though focus groups are conducted in a group context, they do, in fact, represent an 'unreal' situation, in as much as respondents are requested to discuss matters that may not constitute a 'normal' conversation.

A problem that must not be overlooked in this context is the subtlety of communication and in particular the overt restrictions upon communication that occur in group discussions. No moderator is fully equipped to have a complete understanding of the communication processes that go on in a focus group setting, neither can the full significance of non-verbal behaviour be fully realised (Krueger, 1988). In the context of a focus group interview the significance of means of communication are paramount and yet are inevitably underestimated by its very structure; a structure whereby one interviewer, interviews groups of ten to twelve respondents at one time. The interactions between group members are too complex to be *completely* understood. Indeed, the fact that the researcher in focus group interviews has less control of the structure of the interviews than he or she might have in an individual interview might also be perceived to be a problem.

Bearing the advantages and disadvantages of focus group interviews in mind, a fair summation would be to say that this approach can be an appropriate method for certain kinds of social scientific research. The value of focus group interviews lies in their ability to tap more than just the attitudes and opinions of social actors, but also their actual experiences and perspectives on a research question, in this case, the role of consumption in the everyday lives of young people. In effect, the data which can be collected from focus groups is potentially richer than other more conventional methods, in that respondents can draw upon both

their own experiences and those of their fellow group members to shed light upon a particular research question. However, its limitations, though not serious, are such that researchers need to be wary of using this sort of data in isolation. In terms of my own research, therefore, a conscious decision was made to use focus group interviews as part of an overall grounded research strategy which also incorporated a participant observation, and a Consumer Meanings Questionnaire which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively. Focus groups *add* to other qualitative methods. They do not and cannot be expected to replace them altogether, as Morgan (1988) points out. In this sense, the use of Personal Construct Psychology, as a means of complementing the focus group situation, was a logical part of the process of triangulation.

### **Personal Construct Psychology as a tool for psycho-social research**

At this stage, it is necessary to elaborate upon the value of Personal Construct Psychology which I used in the third phase of my interviews as an attempt to begin to answer the research questions I identified in Chapter 6. Above all, the advantage of Personal Construct Psychology for consumption research lies in the fact that it is a school of psychology that is concerned to understand the personal meanings through which individuals make sense of their social worlds. Whilst my first two focus group interviews, which I will discuss in more detail shortly, addressed the role of consumption in identity construction in terms of my respondents' own opinions and experiences, they were not equipped alone to address the actual meanings that they applied to those goods that they consumed. Personal Construct Psychology provided the tools by which such meanings could be begin to be addressed more directly. As Furby (1991) notes, the need to adopt transdisciplinary approaches to consumption, and more particularly, the relationship between consumption and identity, is paramount. In effect, Personal Construct Psychology is useful in as much as it allows the

researcher to 'get into young people's shoes' in order to understand what meaning those shoes have for them.

It is necessary at this point, to briefly outline the theoretical context in which Personal Construct Psychology operates. Personal Construct Psychology focuses on the personal systems of meanings through which individuals encounter and make sense of their social worlds. Established in 1955 by George Kelly, Personal Construct Psychology is not hindered by any fundamental assumptions that human beings are inhibited by innate forces (eg. psychoanalysis), or that individuals have certain essential qualities all of which represent a product of a history of reinforcement (eg. behaviourism). Rather, it attempts to address the personal meanings or constructs which individuals bring to everyday experience. The individual is not a passive product of innate forces or a passive recipient of external forces, but rather is naturally and consistently engaged in a social world. Kelly (1955) focused on individual meanings, the idea that each individual places his or her own unique construction on events. What characterises an individual is the kind of constructs he or she places on events. In effect, an individual construes or interprets events by superimposing his or her own particular system of conceptual categories, by asking him or herself silent questions about each event thereby enabling personal meaningful action. A system of constructs provides the individual with his or her own personal network of 'action pathways' which serve both to limit his or her movements, but also to open up passages of freedom which would otherwise be "psychologically non-existent" (Kelly, 1969, p.199). Kelly (1955) therefore argued that you can understand a person according to the extent to which you understand his or her constructs, the way in which he or she anticipates events. But these constructs are seen to be drawn from a social context, a context within which the individual interacts with other individuals.

Though Kelly (1955) assumes that peoples constructs are idiosyncratic, his theory does take account of group influences in a cultural context. In particular, Kelly is concerned with change, the way in which the individual's experience of cultural life, and his or her reactions to those changes, alter over time. As such Kelly sees human beings as constantly reacting to and acting upon their social worlds,

"Personal Construct Psychology does not deny that a person's experiences have a powerful impact upon the rest of their life, but Kelly insisted that it is not the event itself that has such force, but the way in which the person construes the event. It is the meaning that the person extracts from their experiences that is the important ingredient." (Burr and Butt, 1992, p.4)

In terms of this thesis, the rationale behind my adopting Personal Construct Psychology therefore lies in its prioritisation of individual *meaning*. My argument is that by adopting Personal Construct Psychology's insight for individual change within a sociological context that considers *social* change, it is possible to make some headway in coming to terms with the meanings with which young consumers endow consumer goods. As such, it is interesting to note that Kelly (1969) prefigures some of the concerns of postmodern consumer culture. Kelly argues that the highly developed material world we live in is no longer simple, but presents a complex diversity which the individual is left to deal with the best way he or she can. Consequently, the "outcome is a society in which a lot of miscellany is available, but few people are able to find in all the clutter what they most earnestly crave" (Kelly, 1969, p.205).

Unlike other psychological theories Kelly (1955) actually counterbalances any emphasis on individuality in his commonality corollary, in which he states that insofar as people construe events in a similar manner they may behave in a similar manner to each other. Kelly (1963) therefore argues that culture should be

taken to mean similarity in what members of the group expect of each other. But rather than seeing the expectations of others as stimuli to which each person is subjected, more emphasis is placed upon the outlook of the individual, by understanding cultural similarity between persons as essentially a similarity in what they perceive is expected of them.

The appeal of Personal Construct Psychology as a means of addressing the themes that underlay this thesis are clear. Within the conceptual parameters I presented above, Personal Construct Psychology provides flexible techniques and methods for researching *personal* meanings. However, it should not be forgotten that such an approach has its limitations, the most immediate of which is the fact that the methods Personal Construct Psychology employs rely on a significant degree of expertise on the part of the researcher. In turn, as I will discuss later, in as much as the onus is on respondents, both theoretically and methodologically, to present their own constructs, it could be argued that the more inarticulate the individual, the less forthcoming his or her constructs will be.

Before I discuss the specific design features of my Personal Construct Psychology based interview later on in this chapter I should elaborate upon Kelly's (1955) notion of the Personal Construct. Kelly (1955) looks upon a construct as a way in which two or more things are alike and thereby different from a third. As such, constructs are bi-polar, Kelly's argument being that people never affirm something without simultaneously denying something else. In effect, Kelly argues that we make sense of the world in terms of differences and likenesses. Constructs can therefore be described as a means of discrimination between observed items. As such, if we were to buy a pair of trainers because they were "trendy" we might be describing those trainers in contrast to the perception that trainers might also be "boring", "naïf" or "unfashionable." But the important

point to make here, is that constructs represent the individual's perception, in this case of a pair of trainers, and as such might be irrelevant for any other individual. From a sociological point of view then, any broader comment as to the relationship between consumption and identity in contemporary society can only be made in relation to a pattern of similar constructions, in the case of this research, amongst young consumers. Dalton and Dunnett (1992) argue that as far as the individual is concerned constructs act as signposts which help the individual to look for recurrent themes in the endless flow of living; signposts which can be used in the future in order to help the individual *anticipate* what may come next. To this end, two methods associated with Personal Construct Psychology were adopted, namely repertory grids and self-characterisation sketches, both of which I will discuss in more detail shortly.

### **Pilot focus group interview design**

Before I consider the nature of the data collected during my final focus groups, I want to focus more specifically on my pilot focus group interviews, followed by the actual design of my three-stage interview process.

Many of the advantages of focus groups which I discussed above came to fruition during the course of this stage of my research. The focus group situation appeared to offer a rich source of data; data which was negotiated in the group setting, and which therefore reflected some of the group dimensions of the consuming experience. The relatively informal nature of the focus group interviews encouraged my respondents to talk in detail about the issues that were being raised.

### **i) Sampling strategy**

For ease of access and as a means of targeting a sample which was broadly similar to the one I intended to pursue during the course of this research, the

focus group interviews were originally piloted with students from the University of Huddersfield. This provided the opportunity of both familiarising myself with the techniques and skills necessary to conduct effective focus groups and also to hone my broad questions, which I developed after close consideration of the relevant literature, as discussed in Chapters 2 to 5.

## **ii) Sample details**

Three groups of ten first year Behavioural Sciences students were recruited. My pilot respondents were volunteers who signed up after a call for respondents, which was circulated amongst first year students, in order that recruits were as near to my intended age sample as possible. Having said that, a minority of my pilot respondents were mature students. In this sense, the sample was made up of respondents who *wanted* to get involved. This might be said to bias my sample somewhat, in that it involved a particular type of respondent. However, I did not deem this issue to be of particular significance at the pilot stage of my research in that my main priority, at this stage, was to test my procedures rather than garner evidence. Each of the groups included respondents who were acquainted with one another, as well as those who were not.

## **iii) Interview design**

After the initial literature review, some definite decisions as to what broad questions would be asked in my focus group interviews were made, according to how I felt the meanings with which young people endowed consumer goods might be most effectively addressed. As such, I drew up an interview schedule, the details of which are provided in Appendix 1. This schedule was closely followed with each of my three pilot focus groups. This involved my laying some of the ground rules that needed to be followed in this sort of group situation, followed by a series of pre-prepared question areas. I also told my respondents that anything that was said would be strictly confidential. I made a conscious



decision to make my pilot interviews reasonably structured, as a main intention was to become familiar with the skills necessary in order to conduct a group discussion effectively. The questions I chose were designed, above all, to stimulate debate. Thus I initially asked my respondents what they had done on the previous Saturday, following up any mention of shopping. Secondly, I went on to open the discussion to how their friends and other groups influenced their lives. Thirdly, I asked them to identify what three things summed them up as a person. Finally, I used photographs from magazines of young people as a means of stimulating discussion about the significance of consumption in people's lives. Each of the interviews lasted approximately an hour.

#### **iv) Procedure**

The pilot focus group interviews took place in the Behavioural Sciences Department research laboratory. All the pilot interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and microphone.

#### **v) Results**

Before I go on to look at the design of my final focus group interviews I will briefly discuss the results gleaned from my pilot interviews which were in themselves encouraging. There was certainly some preliminary evidence to suggest that consumption had some role to play in my respondents identities, at least during their teenage years. One woman aged 18 provided a particularly lucid illustration of this point,

"Where I live in down south, it was very much what you wore even at my age. You were looking at people in the pub seeing whether they had the same sort of dress on. It was very much Levi's. If you didn't have them: What are you wearing? What are you doing? Probably it was a very trendy area."

Some of the mature students (6 out of the total of 20 students) in my pilot sample, reinforced my contention that consumption has a significant role to play in the construction of teenage identities when they discussed the consumption habits of their children,

“They’re very conscious about what they wear. Uuuuummm. The eldest one in particular. If he hasn’t got the right pair of trainers on, then he says he’ll come in for all sorts of hassle. He’s got his hair down to here [shoulder-length]. But that’s his statement of being different.”

“It didn’t seem to be like that when I was young. Not at all I’ve seen... I mean my cousin’s twelve and he’s got to have the same trainers. It cost his mother an arm and a leg and yet he doesn’t care, so long as... he’s got to have it.”

Also, the perceived breakdown of community unity was a common theme that ran through my pilot interviews and this was seen to be very much associated with long-term cultural and historical change,

“I think because shopping is seen as where the youth culture is, a lot of the youth culture lies from the things that springs up from that. Like pop music and things. It’s all linked in to fashion, clothes, things like that. Whereas I would imagine thirty years ago you saw identity more in your local community and you maybe didn’t stray too far out of your local community.”

There is no doubt that my pilot interviews allowed me to highlight some very important issues closely related to my research question. They provided an invaluable basis by which it was possible to construct questions suited to addressing concerns which had arisen in the relevant literature, and which were in turn amenable to the group situation. However, their main use, as a precursor to my final interviews, lay in them pinpointing some difficulties that needed to be avoided at that latter stage. In particular, it soon became clear that, as

Behavioural Sciences students, the respondents being interviewed at this stage had a more analytical approach to my questions than I had expected, and clearly tried to apply their social scientific knowledge to the issues at hand. In this respect my results were representative of a peculiarly specific sample. This was a problem I was able to rectify in my final group interviews. In addition, a significant proportion of my interviewees, as I pointed out above, were mature students. The consequence of this was that the experience of those particular interviewees, as consumers and in terms of their individual identities, was very different to that which might be expected of a younger sample. As such, my pilot interviews broadly performed a useful role in focusing in on the relevant issues, but were most useful as a means of honing the skills necessary to conduct effective focus group interviews.

In particular, during my pilot interviews I tended to direct the discussions rather too much and the flow of the interviews suffered as a result. The interviews were rather more structured than I had intended and therefore discouraged the respondents concerned from following their own avenues of debate. Realising the potential richness of data that might be gleaned from the focus group situation, I subsequently reorganised my focus groups into three distinct and more focused interview formats. The first dealt with general issues to do with what role my respondents felt consumption had in their identity construction (see Appendix 2); the second involved my generating discussion around a series of photos of young consumers and consumer goods and their perceived “images” (see Appendices 3, 4 and 5); and the third incorporated techniques derived from Personal Construct Psychology (see Appendices 6, 7, 8 and 9).

## **Final focus group interviews design**

### **i) Sampling strategy**

I intended my sample to represent young people in their latter teenage years for reasons discussed in Chapter 4. It was decided that such groups would be most easily accessed through educational establishments. I therefore sent letters to four schools and colleges in the Huddersfield region.

### **ii) Sample details**

Two representatives of the above colleges agreed to me conducting my research. The respondents in each of my focus groups were aged between 16 and 20 years old. A total of thirty respondents, ten in each group, were interviewed according to the three stage interview process that I will discuss below. I asked my contacts at both the establishments concerned to ensure that the groups consisted, as far as possible, of equal numbers of males and females. Two of the three groups were students undertaking a diploma in Public Service at a Huddersfield college. The third was a group of students who were taking 'A' levels, of a diverse range of subjects, at an additional Huddersfield college. This split was intentional, in as much as it allowed me to avoid any bias that might have emerged if I had concentrated on a sample of young people who largely wanted to pursue an academic career (in this case the 'A' Level students) or alternatively a sample who largely did not (the Public Service students). It might also be argued that this allowed, to an extent, a cross-section of respondents in terms of class, in that it would be a reasonable (though impressionistic) contention to make, that whilst the first two groups were largely working class, the latter was generally middle class. This again allowed for a greater diversity of responses and opinions. I visited each of my groups once a week over a three week period. Each of the total of nine interviews were approximately one hour long. All my respondents were guaranteed confidentiality. This was important as during the course of the three

interview stages I became reasonably familiar with the attitudes and occasionally, the personal lives, of the respondents concerned.

### **iii) Design of interview 1: Consumption and identity issues**

The intention of my first interview was to consider the role which consumption played in the lives of young people and to begin to address how significant that role was (see Appendix 2). After a general introduction, during which an outline of the broad issues which needed to be discussed (though I referred to young people's lifestyles as the subject of the interview rather than consumption, in case this encouraged them to exaggerate the significance of consumption in their lives), was presented to the respondents, I proceeded to focus on three main question areas, according to the rationale below.

#### **QUESTION 1**

This dealt with the status of shopping as a leisure activity. The intention at this stage was to ascertain how important shopping was to young consumers. As such, respondents were asked to write down on a piece of card five leisure activities they had undertaken in the last two weeks. It was of interest as to whether or not shopping appeared on these lists, in that this might provide some indication of the significance of the role it may play in their lives. My respondents were then asked to rank the activities from 1 to 5, signifying the activity they would be least prepared to give up down to the one they could most easily give up if they had to. If they did not mention shopping, at all, in their original list, then I asked them to add it to their list and signify how prepared they would be to give shopping up as an activity in relation to the other five activities they had already identified. This question was then used as a means of developing the discussion further around shopping issues. Did they meet their friends regularly in the town centre? Do they get much opportunity to buy

much? What would they do I gave them £50 to spend? These are the sort of issues I brought up depending upon the flow of the discussion.

### **QUESTION 2:**

At this stage I asked my respondents, one by one, to identify three things that they felt summed them up as a person. I told them that this could include absolutely anything they personally felt was relevant. By generating a discussion in this fashion, I hoped to highlight points of interest to the consumption/identity debate, and how such issues related to young people's overall conceptions of themselves.

### **QUESTION 3**

This part of the interview was initially concerned with addressing how important my respondents felt friends were in their life, and in particular how far they perceived their friends patterns of consumption as influencing their own consumption choices. I also, asked my respondents how important they felt other people were in their lives. To this end I used a checklist which included family, employers (if any), teachers, neighbours and media figures. I thereby intended to establish a broad understanding of which groups or people my respondents felt had an influential role in their lives. If the way in which the discussion developed meant that the significance of a particular group did not arise, then it was not deemed a problem, if, for instance, the question as to the significance of media figures in young people's lives was not asked. Within the confines of my research, the agenda, to an extent, was set by my respondents.

#### **iv) Design of interview 2: Visual images**

The focus of this session was the ease with which young consumers associated different "types" of people with different consumer goods. Were there common ideas as to the sorts of things a rapper, a student, a smart dresser, a heavy, or a

“sunshine boy” (see page 162) would buy ? If so, what implications might this have for the identities of young consumers and for the influence of consumer culture on individual identities? In effect, the rationale here was to come to terms with the extent to which it was possible to identify a ‘cultural capital of consumption’ and the prevalent role this may or may not have in the lives of teenage consumers .

I therefore presented my focus groups with photographs, taken from youth magazines, of five teenagers, each of which could be described loosely as being one of the five ‘types’ above (see Appendix 4). These specific ‘types’ were chosen because, as a collective, they represented what appeared to be a reasonable cross-section of teenage lifestyles. To aid my respondents in their task these ‘types’ were assigned names, as is evident in the appendix. A discussion was then generated about what would happen if the focus group members were to change their images and come into college dressed in the appropriate fashion. My groups were then presented with a collage of 26 separate consumer goods, ranging from a hi-fi down to a bottle of beer (see Appendix 5). The collage consisted of goods that appear to be aimed at the youth market and were chosen for their diversity. However, in addition, there were also items similar to one another in order to see how discriminating young people were about design variations in consumer goods. My respondents were asked to decide *as a group* which of the five people would buy which of the consumer goods. A volunteer was then asked to write the group’s decision on the collage. This was then used as a springboard for a discussion about image, consumer goods, and identity. Finally, my group members were asked to identify which of the goods they, as an individual, would purchase, given reasonable resources, in order to identify the extent of commonality between the tastes of a given group of teenage consumers.

## **v) Design of interview 3: Personal Construct Psychology techniques**

### **The repertory grid**

In this final interview, I wanted to go one step further than simply discuss the role of consumption in people's lives and thereby construct some form of deeper understanding of the meanings invested in such goods. The repertory grid provides a means by which the researcher can begin to make sense of an individual's construct system. It is a tool, as Dalton and Dunnnett (1992) point out, for looking at how an individual uses a set of constructs in relation to one another.

In this case, I met each of my three groups for a third time in order to carry out my repertory grid and self-characterisation exercise (see Appendices 6, 7, 8 and 9). I gave each of my respondents a set of instructions in order to simplify the process of completing a repertory grid (Appendix 6). This included my instructing respondents to consider issues that had been discussed during the course of the previous two interviews. In addition, I gave each member of each of the groups a list of "significant others" or elements from which repertory grid constructs could be elicited (Appendix 7). This consisted of ten combinations of three significant others, namely: mother, best-college mate, best non-college mate, tutor, brother or sister, neighbour and self. I choose these role titles very carefully in order that I could begin to address the relationship between my respondents' consumption related constructs and how they perceived significant others in the same context. In effect, I wanted to begin to consider how far my respondents were influenced in the meanings they applied to the goods they consumed, by their significant others. Were, for instance, they influenced more by their parents than by their best friends? Did their neighbours have any role to play at all in the construction of meaning in this context?



The actual process of elicitation involved my asking my respondents to consider individually, in terms of the sorts of things the group as a whole had discussed in the previous focus group sessions, which ways two of the significant others (Appendix 8, point i) presented to them in my list were alike, and at the same time essentially different from the third. Thus, my respondents were instructed to write down their emergent pole (the difference they thought up initially) in the far left hand column (Appendix 8, point ii) and their contrast pole in the far right hand column (Appendix 8, point iii). Once my respondents had identified a series of constructs I asked them to signify which pole they associated with each of their significant others (Appendix 8, point iv). Thus, they marked the grid I provided with either an L (left-hand pole) or an R (right-hand pole). Finally, I asked my respondents to rate how they themselves fitted into the constructs they had used (point v). Thus, if they had a construct that read "Wears trendy trainers" - "Wears Marks and Sparks trainers" they would mark 1 if they saw themselves in the former category, 5 in the latter, and 2-4 if they saw themselves as somewhere in between (point v). Due to time constraints it was not possible for my respondents to provide this degree of detail for all their identified significant others. But it was felt that this information would be an interesting indicator of how my respondents perceived themselves in terms of the continuum that they had personally identified.

### **The self-characterisation sketch**

At this stage of the interview, I was concerned with how significant young people felt that consumption was in relation to overall constructions of how they saw themselves as individuals. I asked my respondents to complete a self-characterisation sketch in order that it might be possible to make some informed judgement as to how consumption fitted in to their overall lives (see Appendix 9 where five completed examples are provided). A self-characterisation sketch

involves a respondent writing a brief description of him or herself in the third person, prioritising whatever characteristics he or she sees as significant.

By filling in a self-characterisation sketch my respondents were not under pressure to answer specific questions but were free to say what they wanted about themselves. From this data, I intended to make some inference about where consumption fits in, in relation to how they perceive themselves as individuals. As a means of eliciting constructs, the self-characterisation sketch has been criticised for being less “tidy” or structured than a repertory grid, as Fransella and Bannister (1977) note. It is certainly a very ‘loose’ method within which potentially the respondent could highlight a vast amount of issues, none of which are relevant to the research question. Indeed, standing alone as the sole method in any research project, self-characterisation sketches could be considered to be weak. However, combining their ability to give the respondent a free rein with other more structured methods is clearly of benefit. The advantages of this technique lie in the freedom it allows the individual to lay the foundations of his or her construct system down on paper without recourse to the sometimes difficult task of thinking of actual bi-polar constructs. The wording of the instructions are therefore crucial and Kelly’s original instructions are used, with the minor addition of the request for my respondents to, “Include some idea of the things you like to buy and do.” This request was intended to inform my respondents that they were not restricted merely to a discussion of character traits, but were free to identify any aspects of their lives that they saw fit to discuss. The fact that respondents are asked to write in the third person is particularly important, as is the suggestion that they should write from the viewpoint of a close friend, in order that respondents are not overly self-critical.

This method of construct elicitation is the least restrictive of any of the methods associated with Personal Construct Psychology. Though there is a danger that

individuals may be reluctant to write about themselves in detail, it is up to the person conducting the research, in this case myself, to stress that the length is unimportant, and the content itself is a matter of free choice. Having collected my respondent's self-characterisation sketches, it was my task to identify themes that ran through them as a whole.

#### **vi) Procedure**

My final focus group interviews took place in classrooms in the respective colleges. Again, all the interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and microphone. Much like my pilot focus groups, in my introductory comments, I again asked my respondents to make a special effort not to talk all at once, in order to aid transcription. The third, Personal Construct Psychology interview involved my respondents completing repertory grid sheets which I provided (Appendix 8). The self-characterisation sketches were also completed on sheets of paper prepared for the task (Appendix 9). All the above were collected at the end of the third group interview, at which point I thanked my respondents for their participation and reiterated the fact that all material would be treated confidentially. All my interviews were subsequently transcribed.

#### **Results**

In this section, I propose to discuss the findings collected during each of my three final focus group interviews. I will then go on to discuss broad overall themes, as a means of bringing the data together towards a *preliminary* consideration of the role that consumption plays in constructing young people's identities. I should also reiterate, at this point, that the analysis of my data is self-consciously qualitative in the sense that my primary intention was for young consumers to express the role that consumption played in their lives. I therefore intend to construct a qualitative picture of the role which consumption may or may not

play in young people's lives. At this stage, I want, as far as possible, for young consumers to speak for themselves.

### **Interview 1**

At this point, I should acknowledge that there was no discernible divergence between the material I collected from my 'vocational' respondents and that of my 'academic' respondents. It is therefore not necessary to consider the data collected from these groups separately. In this section, I consider my results in the context of the following overall themes: resources; shopping; consumption and identity; and other factors influencing identity construction.

#### **a) Resources**

The first point to make is that it soon became clear that money represented a major consideration and concern for young consumers. It is all well and good discussing the consumption habits of young people, but without recognising the finite restrictions on their resources, any discussion of this sort can only be misleading.

Louise: "I can't buy what I want, I can only buy what I can afford. If I could buy what I wanted I wouldn't be stuck for choice. But I've got to keep it to a certain price range."

Members of my focus groups exhibited a strong awareness of financial matters. Far from being a trivial matter, spending money was clearly something that justified a lot of thought on the part of my respondents, to the extent that several mentioned how much better they felt about spending money they had earned, as compared to money they were given by their parents,

Justine: "Depends on how you got your money as well. Like if you had to work for it, it feels better, than if someone just gave you the money. It's just too easy that way."

All three of my groups were asked how they would spend £50 if I were to give it to each of them. Over half of them said that they would save it, reflecting how responsible they *have* to be in the current economic climate. This emphasis on economy was a reoccurring theme,

Paul: "People tend to go for economy at our age I think actually. As long as it looks good and you like it then I think it's alright."

Gary "Doc Marten's are expensive but I've got a pair that I've had for five or six years."

Reshma: "With Docs they don't wear out that quickly."

Paul: "Yeah, you can get 'em re-soled and everything. They're really tough. You can get the imitations from Dolcis and the stitching comes out within two weeks. So I wouldn't waste my money."

So, far from the image of young consumers as being carefree and footloose, they seem, certainly in their purchasing decisions, to be very sensible. In reality, they cannot afford to be otherwise,

Justine: "There's no way you can just decide I'm gonna start dressing like this and then go out and buy everything. It'd take yer weeks and weeks to buy one outfit let alone a whole wardrobe."

Any discussion of shopping and consumption needs to be aware of these sorts of concerns. Teenage consumers have to make very careful decisions about the pros and cons of particular items. Having said that, many are also very aware of the

significance of money in contemporary culture and intend, in time, to make the most of that knowledge,

Gary: "We live in a capitalist society though. Money's bound to be important to us. I mean everybody's out to get as much money as they possibly can. Give as little away as possible really."

Indeed, it would be fair to say, and this was further highlighted during the visual exercises, that only one member of the three groups showed any reluctance at all to become fully embroiled in the culture of consumerism. All, but this one exception, showed a strong desire for consumer goods and never questioned whether or not this was a desirable state of affairs. Only Elizabeth expressed any distaste for consumer goods, in advocating the farm-based lifestyle of her family (see pages 174 - 175). The fact that consumer culture generally goes unquestioned; that the ideologies it proffers are embraced wholeheartedly, can only further emphasise how important it is for the sociologist to come to terms with the subtleties involved in the relationship between consumption and identity (see Chapters 5 and 10). On the other hand, the sociologist must not imply that the influences of consumer culture are universal.

## **b) Shopping**

The evidence collected during my focus group interviews, or at least that which emerged in answers to the question which looked at shopping as a leisure activity, illustrates that shopping is regarded by my respondents as a leisure activity of middling importance. But perhaps the most significant point is that it is regarded as such at all, unlike much of the literature that looks at young people's leisure (e.g. Hendry et al., 1993).

Of a total of thirty three respondents, eleven mentioned shopping as a leisure activity in their original list. The general trend was for my respondents to rank

shopping as between the second and fourth most important of the leisure activities they had conducted in the previous two weeks, whether or not they mentioned it in their original list.

Clearly, shopping is a rather different activity to “playing netball”, “going to the pub” or “playing computer games”, in that it is not an end in itself. Conventional wisdom might well be that when an individual goes shopping he or she may not necessarily see the activity of shopping *per se*, as a leisure activity, in that the intention, at least in some cases, is to make purchases, from which pleasure is derived. It would be foolish to suggest that the mere fact that young consumers do recognise shopping as being a leisure activity means that consumption has an important role to play in constructing identities. However, there might well be an argument for saying that historically shopping has come to play an increasingly important role in people’s lives and therefore *potentially* this provides a basis upon which consumption comes to have a role to play in the actual construction of identities.

Moving on to the more general discussion of shopping that ran through my focus groups, opinion was divided. Whereas some of my respondents saw shopping as “just something you do”, others saw it as having a more important role in their lives,

Darren: “It’s important to me. I just like doing it. I don’t know. I just like getting out and seeing stuff.”

The difficulty that people have in actually explaining the importance that shopping has for them, is a pertinent point, closely related to my discussion of why it is that teenagers find it hard to explain their liking of particular styles, such as ‘retro’ trainers (see Chapter 8). It is easy for a teenager to say, “I love

playing basketball because I enjoy it and I'm quite good at it too." It is not so easy to say why they like doing an activity that on the surface appears to have no intrinsic value beyond the actual purchase itself. The very fact that shopping is not prioritised as a leisure activity, and the very fact that it is not explicitly acknowledged as an identity-forming activity, make it, potentially, a subtly potent force in the construction of a consumer's identity.

On two occasions during my interviews respondents mentioned how important it was for them to come away after a shopping spree with "something to show for it."

Jack: "Yeah, you walk around Leeds and you don't really see 'owt you like and you come home and you're thinking, that were a real waste of time if you buy something, you're thinking yeah, this has been really worthwhile this. It's been a good day. It's like incentive really."

Marlene: "I just buy something for the sake of it."

Interviewer: "Would that happen then? You come to the end of your trip and think, aaahhh this has been a waste of time I'd best buy something."

Darren: "Occasionally. Once or twice."

Marlene: "I'd get annoyed that I ain't got nowt."

Darren: "And you get home and think, Christ, why did I get this?"

Marlene: "You get a good feeling if you walk back with something. If you go out willing to buy something and you come back without anything, then you're thinking, oh my god!!!"

It might be argued that young consumers feel that shopping is somehow a frivolous and wasteful activity unless actively substantiated by an end-product. That, in effect, if you fail to buy something, you are demeaning yourself, you are



wasting time and effort, without anything to show for it. On the other hand, if you do manage to purchase something, you can rest assured that you are actively contributing to who you are as a person. According to this argument, shopping, can, indeed, contribute something to an individual's sense of identity, but that contribution can only be a positive one, if it involves actually purchasing a specific item. Young consumers are thus, arguably, drawn into purchasing an item, in the belief that purchase will reap positive rewards in terms of reinforcing, both to themselves and to the outside world, who it is they are as a person.

It does appear, however, that the positive feelings gained from buying something from the shops is only short-term in nature. For instance, I asked one of my groups how long the "good feeling" they associated with buying something new, lasted,

Justine: "After you've worn them a couple of times and they're not new anymore."

David: "It all depends. If you've been saving up for it for months and months then it lasts a while. But say you were just going to town to buy a single it lasts for a while and then..."

### **c) Consumption and identity**

In the context of a consideration of the role of consumption in the construction of identities a constantly re-emerging theme, discussed at great length by my respondents, was the role of branded goods and the confidence they seem to provide them with. This was particularly true in the context of clothing,

Phil: "Yeah, they (name brands) give you confidence and that. If you like what you're wearing, if you think you've spent a lot of money on it like, it gives you a lot of confidence."

Andrew: "It shows you've a bit of class as well I think if you start wearing name brands."

Interviewer: "But why should a name brand be better than something like..."

Maggie: "It's like that purple Timberland jumper you've got (looks at Jack). Ticket's on inside, so you can't see it anyway."

Jack: "Yeah. But you can tell it's a class jumper though."

Jeff: "Yeah, but as Darren says, you know yourself."

Clearly then, purchasing something that is perceived as being of good quality has important implications for the young consumer. Not least, in terms of how they as an individual are perceived by their peers,

Tony: "If you're walking down the street in Leeds and everyone's your age and you're wearing something totally different. You'll be thinking you know is everybody looking at me."

Shannon: "But the thing is, if you really feel comfortable in those clothes and you really like those clothes you wouldn't feel that way."

Mandy: "But if something like that became fashion and everyone started wearing it, you'd probably end up wearing it."

Tony: "I'm forever buying stuff just because I've seen it on someone else, I try it on and see if it looks good on me. Then you buy it. It might look rubbish on you, but everybody's wearing it so..."

But it is not purely the fact that friends perceive you in a certain way, as a result of your wearing a particular brand, though this is, of course, important, and is no doubt more important to some teenagers than to others; but the Timberland example illustrates that the significance of the name brand can go further than

that. This particular respondent feels better as a result of wearing a name brand, despite the fact that name is not displayed. The confidence gained from that name is not, arguably, a mere result of external influences, that is the meanings applied to it by peers, but such confidence is also 'internal', in that the individual gets a personal sense of satisfaction by wearing what is perceived to be a quality identity-forming product.

The influence of peers in purchasing decisions is important, but so is the individual's perception of how the product concerned fits in to how he or she is as a person,

Interviewer: "So is it important what your friends think of what you're buying then?"

Jason: "It's not really what you're buying. It's what they think of you. It kind of comes through in what you're buying."

Interviewer: "So are you saying in some way what you buy reflects who you are then?"

Jason: "Well, partially yes. Well in some things. Not really in food or something like that. But if you're buying clothes or records it reflects on yourself."

Joanna: "You want your friends to like it. But it wouldn't affect my decision. I'd want them to like it but if they didn't, I'd buy it anyway."

It can therefore be argued that young consumers are more than mere 'dupes'. That is, they do have at least some degree of critical distance as Willis (1990) argues, and their consumer choices are not completely dominated by peer pressure. Such critical distance was illustrated by many of my respondents who expressed some dissatisfaction with the extent of choice available in shops,

Veronica: Yeah, like when Miss Selfridge came to town I was like thinking "oh yeah!" and then you walked in and it's rubbish. It's useless. It's like what they've got is just exactly the same as what they've got next door in Top Shop or... You know..."

#### **d) Other factors influencing individual identity construction**

Having discussed during my focus group interviews the significance of consumption in young people's lives, I also felt it necessary to discuss, in more detail, other areas of life that my respondents may or may not have seen as significant factors in the construction of their identities. It is not enough to claim that consumption plays an important role in the construction of postmodern identities. It is also important to consider, at least briefly, the broader context. What role do other areas of life, notably friendship, community and family have in relation to consumption?

Has consumption emerged, historically, to have a fundamental role in identity formation at the *expense* of these other factors? Of course, it is impossible for me to answer, in any concrete terms, any of these questions. The best I can do, at this stage, is ask my respondents to discuss their experience of these issues and relate those experiences to the debates which I am addressing throughout this thesis.

In Chapter 3, I briefly discussed the debates that have emerged in sociology over the last two or three decades, over the role of primary sources of identity. The suggestion here is that perhaps consumption has filled a gap as far as identity is concerned where family, community and religion once stood. Whereas in the modern primary sources of identity played a pivotal role in establishing a person's identity, in the postmodern world this is arguably no longer the case and the individual is increasingly dependent upon more impersonal means for establishing who he or she is.

From the evidence provided by my interviewees, the demise of the family unit appears, to an extent, to be exaggerated. Some of my respondents went to great lengths to describe how important their families actually were to them,

Laura: "Can't get away from me mum. It sounds stupid but like when we went away on residentials if I can't hear me mums voice I can't rest. I can't bear to be away from her."

Bryan: "My parents pay for everything and I don't have to work and me mum let's me borrow her car and stuff like that. And they're willing to pay for me to go to University. No problems. It just makes life easier. I don't have to worry about stuff."

As far as influencing my respondents identities is concerned, however, the feeling was that families had a limited impact,

Frank: "I respect me family. But they don't influence me in any way. I'll ignore most... If they knew what I did they'd probably throw me out and never speak to me again but..."

Certainly, it would be fair to say that families are important in their lives, but at the same time there was little to suggest, other than in what Laura had to say, that the family had any *formative* role in who they were as individuals. This influence was probably more in evidence in the earlier teenage years,

Frank: "My mum and dad started me off in like little groups. Like Greek club, swimming club from an early age so I was like mixing with kids and other people... so I had to really communicate with other people. So that's given me an advantage. Like you can go out and talk to people and you know people from different classes... well different groups of people and like you still meet people out now that you knew when you were young."

In addition, several of my respondents, said that they listened more to their brothers and sisters than their parents, and that the former had more influence

over them. However, it has to be said that very few conclusions can be made about such a complex issue from short discussions within a focus group format. The role of the family in establishing identities represents a massive research question in itself and one that is impossible to answer in this context. What I will say, is that perhaps, in contemporary society, factors such as geographical mobility have determined that family ties are not as strong as they have been in the past. Though this would obviously vary considerably between families,

Tom: "My mum lives in Norfolk so I hardly ever see her. And me dad kicked me out so I don't see him very much either."

Moving on to community as a source of identity in contemporary society, my respondents, almost without exception, expressed the impersonal nature of the local areas in which they lived. Well aware of the tendency to exaggerate the ties that communities have provided in the past, any community feeling they draw upon is often rooted in the college,

Tom: "Well, you always look at the past with rose tinted views anyway, don't you. Like oh remember, the past, it was so great. But it does seem that community spirit is dying quite a bit because you don't know your neighbours or your corner shops don't know your neighbours, stuff like that."

Jackie: "Depends what community you're talking about. Like the college community that's quite good. You've got your friends that are part of your community and if you go to church that's a different community. Quite a strong one."

One or two of the group members did say, however, that if you did want to get involved in the local community it *was* there. All you had to do was make the effort. Perhaps, therein lies the problem. People today are more prepared to live

their own lives than they are to foster a community spirit. The latter entails effort they are not prepared to commit,

Gordon: "I'm not allowed to speak to my next door neighbour or her boyfriend'll beat me up... One time I was trying to say hello to her and she was on the path with her boyfriend and he started shouting at me."

Overall, it seems likely that community spirit has little impact on the lives of my respondents. It was more important to them as children, while their parents do, occasionally, associate with their neighbours.

Alex: "There's loads of people in our street and we don't even know them."

It appears, that, at least as far as my respondents are concerned, both family and community have a limited role to play in identity construction. However, when asked to think of other influences on their identity they identified several relevant factors. These included the ambitions that they had and the career direction they wanted to move in. Others mentioned the influence of religion; a minority of my group members being Christians. The consensus was certainly that as individuals they were influenced very little by their college tutors. Overall the most important influence on my respondents identity appears to be their friends, which in turn relates to the significance consumption has for young people in the context of peer pressure.

Indeed, it would be fair to say that friends were the most important single factor to come out of my focus group interviews. There was much evidence to suggest that friendship plays a very important role in teenage lives and has a significant role to play in influencing how teenagers perceive themselves as individuals,

Interviewer: "So talking about friends. How important do you think your friends are to how you are as a person? Do your friends like have a big influence on you or...

David : "Yeah. They're the most important thing to us.

Interviewer: In what way do they sort of influence you?

David: "Whenever you go out. You never go out down town by yourself. Well I never do anyway. Never once been down a night club by meself. Friends are always with me. I mean friends are important aren't they? And it's always the same group of friends, just about.

Jack: "I think the way you dress is related to who your friends are. What kind of music you listen to."

This, in turn, can be closely related to what I will say subsequently about the cultural capital of consumption and how it is that friends play an important role in teenagers prioritising consumption as a means of expression in contemporary society. Teenagers are keen to remain in favour and do so partly through the consumption of mutually acceptable consumer goods, not least clothing. Apparently, friendship groups play at least some role as arbiters of identity, in that they seem to actually provide a context, a set of parameters, if you like, within which teenagers construct their identities.

Darren: "They talk to yer. They can give you confidence or they can take it away I think."

Jack: "Say if you go out with a load of mates and they all decide to pick on you that night and your gonna take crap all night so your not gonna be confident. But if your getting along with all the others alright and you're part of a social group then you're gonna feel really good, so you've got more confidence."



The general feeling amongst my respondents was that though friends were a strong influence in their lives, there is no reason why members of a social group should have identical interests. However, they certainly have at least some influence, not least when it comes to consumer goods,

Ruth: "If you go around with people for a long enough time you're bound to end up like them. Not exactly like them, but you'll end up with some of their characteristics, and they'll end up with some of yours."

Martin: "If they find something new they like you sometimes find you like it as well."

It is probably fair to say that friends do play an important part in how teenagers develop as individuals, in all sorts of ways, other than in terms of consumption,

Reshma: "But your friends; they don't really like you for what you wear innit. It's just what you are inside really. It's if you can get on and stuff like that. Like with my friend, I knew her at Junior School and everything and then she went to High School, and you know, been to there for about 3 years. You know, she's a raver. She's out every single night. She's pissed and she's... You know. I ain't nothing like that but we still get on."

## **Interview 2**

The role that friends do play in the context of consumption was more forcibly illustrated during the second stage of interviews. My respondents appeared able to make the tiniest discriminations between similar items, often according to specific brand-names and were easily able, as a group, to agree upon such discriminations (see Appendix 5). They would, for instance, seek clarification as to the brand-name of a particular item, the training shoes, or the hi-fi, for example, and base their decision upon that piece of information, immediately collating a brand with an image of a consumer.

In addition, subtle discriminations were made between similar items. For instance, two ruck-sacks were featured on the collage that was presented to my respondents. Though as three distinct groups my respondents designated the ruck-sacks, broadly speaking to the same people (i.e. either Emma, Jay, Jackie, Jay or Simone; see Appendix 4); they also broadly agreed that as individual ruck-sacks they would appeal to *different* people. What became immediately obvious was that young people have a well developed ability to label fellow consumers according to specific criteria, criteria they have apparently learnt as a result of being exposed to the wares of consumer culture and the mass media, and as a result of being party to the cultural capital of consumption. Each of the four groups came up with very similar interpretations of which consumer goods the five people in my pictures might buy (see figure 1). Though it was deemed inappropriate to look at this material statistically in as much as it concerned the negotiations of only three groups; in fact the three groups concerned matched 16 of the 26 items with the same person; either Emma, Gary, Jackie, Jay or Simone. The exercise seemed to come very naturally to all my respondents. The fact that young consumers find it relatively easy to construct an image of what sort of person somebody is, through putting together a jigsaw of consumer goods, would imply that as far as teenage consumers are concerned, consumer goods are strong indicators of what a person is like.

All three focus groups located the items displayed with comparative ease and each was quick to come to a consensus. When asked how far they felt the exercise was an easy thing to do, the general opinion, was yes, that it was, but only to an extent,

Gordon: "Yeah, you can associate but you don't know if you're right 'cos a lot of people don't wear what you think they would. Me for instance, I like rave, but I like Heavy Metal and stuff as well. You can't tell what people like and don't like."

**Figure 1: Designation of consumer goods in the visual-based exercise**

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>GROUP 1</b>	<b>GROUP 2</b>	<b>GROUP 3</b>
<b>Long boots</b>	Si (Simone)	Em (Emma)	Si
<b>Dark ruck sack</b>	Ga (Gary)	Ga	NONE
<b>Jack Daniels</b>	Jac (Jackie)	Jac	Gra/ Si
<b>Chanel</b>	Em/ Jay	Em	Em/ Jay
<b>Hi-fi</b>	Ga/ Em	Jac/ Jay/ Gar/ Em	Em/ Jay
<b>Discman</b>	Si	Ga/ Jay	Em/ Jay
<b>T-shirt</b>	NONE	NONE	Ga/ Jac/ Si
<b>Rollerblades</b>	Sim	Si	ALL
<b>Light ruck-sack</b>	Jac	Jay/ Jac/ Sim	Sim/ Jac
<b>Molsen Dry</b>	Gar/ Emm	Gar	ALL
<b>Brody</b>	Gar/ Jac	Jac	Jac/ Sim
<b>Lacoste</b>	Gar	Jay	Em/ Jay
<b>Dunhill</b>	Gar/ Jac	Jac/ Si/ Jay	Jac/ Si/ Ga
<b>Walkman</b>	Sim/ Gar	Ja/ Ga	Jac/ Jay/ Si
<b>Cap</b>	Sim	Sim/ Gar	Sim
<b>Body Shop</b>	Jay/ Em	Jay/ Em	Em
<b>Timotei</b>	Jay/ Emm	Jay/ Em	Jay/ Si/ Em/ Jac
<b>Perrier</b>	Jay/ Em	Jay/ Em	Jay/ Em
<b>New Woman</b>	Em	Em	Em
<b>Next</b>	Jay	Em	Em/ Jay
<b>Diet Coke</b>	Jay/ Em	Jay/ Sim	ALL
<b>Boots</b>	Jac/ Jay	Jac/ Jay	Jac/ Si
<b>Nirvana CD</b>	Jac	Jac/ Jay/ Ga	Ga
<b>Converse</b>	Si/ Gar	Si/ Ga	Si/ Ga
<b>Scooter</b>	Jay	Ga	NONE
<b>High heel shoes</b>	NONE	Si/ Emm	Si
<b>Chanel Perfume</b>	Em/ Jay	Em	Em/ Jay

Paul: "It's what underneath that counts."

Gordon: "That's right. Yeah."

Though my respondents acknowledged that it was an impossible task to accurately associate particular consumer goods with pictures of individuals, and thereby draw an accurate picture of what those people are like, they did find it easy to generalise to this end. Their experience of consumer culture was such that they were able to make judgements about individuals according to the clothing they wore. Clearly when constructing their images of the five individuals they were using the consumer goods on display as a means of expressing who those people were. It was not just a case of guessing what individual items what person would buy, but more importantly they were constructing an overall picture of what a person was like according to the goods he or she might purchase. Thus, my respondents made inferences about the personalities, indeed the identities of the young people in the pictures. This is related to the point about the paradox between personal individuality and communal conformity.

Gordon, for instance, inadvertently acknowledged the implications of consumer culture, and thereby the limitations of individuality by 'pigeonholing' one of the people photographed as,

"a sunshine boy. That's one of my categories. I have me own categories of how people dress. He's what I call a sunshine boy."

Though he professed himself as unique, Gordon still employed the cultural capital of consumption as a frame of reference to distinguish between other 'types' of consumer. He acknowledges the existence of consumers who can be identified as following the same trend, but cannot address his own position according to the same criteria,

Gordon: "It's easy to associate the actual characters. You know when they dress like this. But nobody dresses the same all the time."

Paul: "But you do."

Gordon: "Yeah. I know, but *I'm* different."

Two of the photos used, those of Jay (the sunshine boy) and Emma, who were both dressed in conservative summery clothing were soon labelled by one of my focus groups as "health freaks". Gary and Jackie on the other hand, dressed in their leather jackets and jeans, were quickly marked down as "music loving drinkers".

Within this broad agreement, individuals were perfectly prepared to make judgements about the people photographed purely according to what they wore. This was something that my respondents agreed was generally true of real life, say for instance if you met somebody new,

Interviewer: "If it's the first day at college do you think you'd be making judgements about people according to what they were wearing?"

All: "Yeah."

Marlene: "That's the first thing you see about 'em. That's before you talk."

Paul: "You shouldn't make judgements against 'em but you do."

Tony: "Everybody does."

Linda: "Yeah, you know what they're like by their clothes don't yer. Like Docs and a long tie-dye skirt and that, and red hair. You know that they're Gothic don't yer."

Again, whilst talking about their own consumption habits and their own identities, my respondents talked very much in terms of their individual preferences. Yet, when talking about others they regularly fall back on communal themes.

Interviewer: "You mentioned brand names. Are brand names important to people your age?"

Jackie: "Can be. Some groups. Depends what you like to wear. Like there's set clothes where it's all names, Reebok, Nike and all sportswear."

Rebecca: "There's the sports and there's the designer and they tend to come in two groups. And you have the designer group, Kelvin Kline and stuff like that... those sort of names and then you've got sporty type people."

My respondents appeared to perceive others in terms of their belonging to a particular youth culture, which adopts well known styles of dress, and indeed, attitudes, or in terms of being a particular "type" of consumer. When talking about their own lifestyles these youth cultural characteristics are forgotten and only their own 'personal' style is remembered.

Suzanne: "When we were at school there were a group of girls that wouldn't wear anything but Levi's. Anything that had Levi's on they had it. There was a group of girls like that. And it was obviously very important to them, but nobody else cared... It's just like really important the way you dress. You can tell 'cos they all dress in the same sort of style. So obviously they've chosen their friends because they look good or because of the way they look, but there's others who it just doesn't matter to."

Many of my respondents felt strongly that they were able to buy, and in particular, wear, exactly what they wanted to free of pressures of any kind. This is apparently part of maturing as a teenager,

Paul: "You just wear what you want don't yer."

Don: "There was more pressure at school. Fifth form at school. It's not as bad now."

Paul: "You don't care at all now. You just wear what you want don't yer?"

Caroline: "I think everyone's got personal choice, ain't they."

When it came to the part of the exercise where each member of the group identified which consumer goods he or she would purchase given reasonable resources, the results were more diverse. For example, only two items were not chosen by anybody in one of my focus groups . Only the hi-fi was chosen by the majority of my respondents. Otherwise, everybody picked an individualistic sample of goods. Again, this appears to reiterate a point highlighted throughout my focus group interviews; namely that when discussing their own relationship with consumer goods young people see those goods as being used in highly individualistic and personal ways, and yet paradoxically far from young people having considerable disagreements as to who might consume what as a result of this individuality; they in fact, appear to have highly honed skills of perception about who 'should' consume what. This might well be taken to reinforce my point about young consumers seeing *themselves* as being individually unique and choosing the goods they liked accordingly.

### **Interview 3: Repertory grids**

The above concerns were reiterated during the third phase of my interviews. In analysing the results gained from the repertory grids (which it should be noted were somewhat limited by a lower attendance; 22 of my 30 respondents actually attending the final stage of interviews), it was possible to identify commonalities in the sorts of constructs that were elicited from my respondents. As previously

indicated, I enclose five examples of completed grids in Appendix 8. In my analysis of the grids as a whole I identified six 'constellations' of constructs which I propose to use as the focus of my analysis. The identification of these constructs involved my listing the elicited constructs and identifying similar constructs that could be grouped together in common themes. Below, I identify these constellations and include representative examples of elicited constructs:

**Shopping** (eg. Doesn't enjoy shopping - Enjoys shopping a lot; Shops at Sainsbury's - Can't afford to shop; Shops at Bronx - Shops at C & A)

7 constructs

**Leisure** (eg. Likes cinema - Likes going to the pub; Goes to nightclubs - Doesn't go to nightclubs; Goes to Laser Quest - Goes to pubs; Likes rugby and football - Hates sport; Plays cricket - watches TV):

57 constructs

**Music** (eg. Listens to Elton John - Listens to Dance Music; Listens to mainstream music - Listens to Radio 2 type music; into head banging music - Into milder chart music):

17 constructs

**Work and money** (eg. Doesn't like spending money - Likes spending money; Works for qualifications - Works for a living; Enjoys spending when have the money - Miser):

9 constructs

**Personal qualities** (eg. Clean and tidy - Slob; Gets up early - Gets up late; Quiet - loud):

11 constructs



**Style** (eg. Wears casual trendy clothes - Wears different clothes;  
Sad lack of dress sense - Sound dress sense; Dresses in a  
similar way eg. jeans - dresses like a raver; Out of fashion -  
In fashion; Quite trendy, nice clothes - Takes care of  
appearance, but not trendy):

40 constructs

I will now consider each of the above constellations in turn:

### **a) Shopping**

Although my respondents did not identify shopping as a key construct during the repertory grid exercise, what did emerge was the significance of money in relation to shopping, reinforcing some of the material I collected from my focus group interviews. In the first example provided in Appendix 8, for instance, my respondent, identified the constructs, "Shops at Sainsbury's - Can't afford to shop" and "Shops at Burton's - Can't afford to shop". He located both himself and his two friends in the latter category, the suggestion being that at least to a certain extent young consumers are disenfranchised from the very culture whose consumerist values play an active role in their identity construction. This again returns me to the point that the very fact that they *are* disenfranchised from consumer culture may encourage consumerist values later on in life when resources are more readily available. And that it is in this respect that consumption may have a long term in constructing an individual's identity. More research needs to be conducted in order to address the long term impact of consumer lifestyles, as I will argue in Chapter 10.

### **b) Leisure**

A great deal of emphasis was placed by my respondents on leisure interests. This reflects the contention by commentators such as Hendry et al. (1993) that leisure represents a major and important arena of expression and identity construction

on the part of teenagers. My group members showed a wide spectrum of interests from drugs to dancing. The data suggests that many of the leisure activities my respondents identified would have implications in terms of the consumption practices of my sample. Many mentioned sporting pastimes for instance (e.g. swimming is mentioned in example 2 in Appendix 8), which boast a thriving retail market all of their own, in terms of sports equipment and clothing.

One of the most interesting points to come out of the constructs to do with leisure pursuits was again this question of 'difference'. In my third example of a completed grid provided in Appendix 8, the respondent concerned, identified one construct as being, "Has different social life - Will go anywhere and have a good time." What is interesting here, again, is what this respondent actually perceives as being "different". This reflects the complex meanings young consumers appear to apply in the context of their peers, in that a lot of the judgements they seem to make appear to operate on what might be described as a "normal - different" continuum. And yet the meaning of "different" can have positive or negative connotations depending on the context. In this particular example, somebody is perceived negatively in that they do not enjoy themselves the same way that the respondent does. In another context, if somebody displays the 'different' wares of retro-culture, for instance, they are seen in a positive light. But the point here is that rather than being a totally individualistic construction, many constructs develop out of peer conceptions of how a teenager *should* behave. As such, another one of my respondents constructs was "Likes going out - Likes staying in, boring", reflecting again, perhaps, the significant influence of peer pressure which decrees that it is boring to stay in, a decree, in turn, that is adopted by the individual as his or her own, without recognition of it's origins.

Clearly, young people partake in a wide range of leisure interests which are predominantly *social* in nature. Time and again, for instance, young people mentioned going to the pub. What is also of interest is the fact, not unexpectedly, that young people's leisure interests were very similar to that of their best friends. In this context, leisure might be described as one of the contexts in which consumption is used as an interactive resource: consuming alcohol whilst at the pub being a good example. Two constructs which were elicited are particularly illustrative of the emphasis young people appear to place on interactive forms of leisure. One respondent identified the construct "Go out together (i.e. in a pair) - Goes out with others"; illustrating again the importance that young people seem to place on group relationships. Another respondent used the construct "Enjoys meeting people - Doesn't enjoy meeting people", identifying all significant others as falling in the former category. Overall, this constellation of constructs illustrates the importance for young people of *interactive* leisure.

### **c) Music**

As far as musical tastes are concerned individuals appear to enjoy a diversity of styles. However, the sorts of music that my respondents' *friends* listen to appears to be a very important influence on the adoption of such styles. Though postmodernists might argue that the individual chooses his or her musical tastes from a vast arena of available choice, the danger here is that the immediate context, the role of peer comparisons is neglected in this equation. Young consumers do appear to pick and choose the music they enjoy, but the musical tastes of their friends represents a major component in such choices. As such, when my respondents incorporated music in their constructs, the vast majority of them identified their musical tastes as being very similar to that of their friends (see Appendix 8; example 3). In this sense, this represents far from a 'free' choice.

#### **d) Work and money**

The significance of mundanities, such as access to resources, which was highlighted throughout the first two phases of the focus groups was reiterated during the repertory grid phase. Whatever diversities of consumer choice that young people may aspire to, it appears that such choice is inevitably limited by more immediate financial considerations. Indeed, part-time jobs were often mentioned in this respect. What was also interesting was the fact that the need to save also cropped up; however three respondents also suggested that on a continuum between “likes to spend a lot of money - miser”, they were very much in the former camp.

#### **e) Personal qualities**

The final constellation of constructs were very diverse from “Long hair - Short hair” to “Dead - Alive.” As such, there is no need to elaborate on this constellation other than to say it reflected the fact that some people found it difficult to identify constructs without resorting to physical attributes. This, might be said, in itself, to further illustrate the point that it is through appearance that people often differentiate between one other.

#### **f) Style**

The most revealing data collected during the Personal Construct Psychology phase of the interviews was undoubtedly collected under the constellation heading, “style”. What is interesting about this group of constructs is the almost universal feeling on the part of all my respondents that they were stylish. Of the fifteen constructs that related in some way to the extent of fashion awareness and dress sense, ten were accompanied by a maximum rating (either a 1 or a 5) by the respondent concerned. Only 5 interviewees had enough doubts to judge that their dress sense was less than trendy. None felt that they were untrendy (though it might be argued that if style is something that is insignificant to an individual

then he or she is hardly likely to construe along the lines of “unfashionable-fashionable”). What was more interesting about the data I collected was the comparisons that my respondents made with either, or both, their best college and non-college mates. Almost without fail the young consumers I interviewed saw themselves in the same ‘fashion-mode’ as their friends, despite the fact that during my previous interviews they had been at pains to stress that they were completely individualistic and avoided following ‘the crowd’ at all costs.

A good example of this trend is illustrated by one respondent (Appendix 8; example 4) who identified both of his friends as “dressing for the look” as opposed to “dressing for comfort”. He also identified himself as being a 5 along this continuum, as dressing very much for the look, and yet the constant suggestion of my focus group interviews was that my respondents dress to satisfy themselves or for comfort, rather than for an social or sub-cultural reasons. Another respondent employed the construct, “Untrendy” - “Takes care of appearance”, the implication being that being trendy is not something that young consumers feel involves “following the sheep” but in fact is an individual choice for purely practical reasons, in this instance, comfort. Indeed, this particular respondent did not even recognise him or herself as being ‘trendy’. Being trendy is not perceived as being an exercise in social acceptance, but rather as a process in individual grooming.

A further construct reinforces this point. One of my respondents identified the construct, “Dress in a similar way” - “Dresses like a raver”. In this case, all of the significant others, excluding himself and his best college and non-college mates, were perceived as dressing in a similar manner. Despite the fact that he identifies himself and his friends in a particular youth cultural category, with particular modes of dress, he does not see that dress as being similar. Rather, by dressing in rave styles he and his friends can be individuals, whilst everybody else who may

not be following a particular youth cultural style of dress are perceived as being “similar”. There clearly is an irony here. By adopting the ‘uniform’ of a particular sub-culture, young consumers will inevitably dress in similar ways, and yet they do not construe this to be the case. As far as the individual is concerned, they are being different, whilst all those around them are wearing the same sorts of things; the difference being that the clothes they wear have more significance to them, personally, as an individualised representation of group allegiance.

Having noticed that constructs to do with ‘trendiness-untrendiness’ consistently emerged in the data collected from my first group, I decided to take the opportunity, when I met the other two groups, of asking them which end of the pole they preferred to be associated with. Though it was clearly possible to infer as much from the data collected, there was virtually unanimous agreement amongst both groups that being trendy was a positive attribute. The evidence suggested that the reason for this was that in the minds of my respondents being trendy amounted to “being like my friends” and this in effect represented a super-ordinate construct; a construct which effectively supersedes their desire to be an individual.

In contrast, other than their friends, my respondents did not see themselves as having much in common stylistically with the significant others they identified. Though my respondents brothers or sisters occasionally appeared to have similar stylistic tastes, the similarity to that of my respondents friends was by far the greater. There appeared to be little correlation between my respondents’ stylistic tastes and that of their mother, tutor and neighbour.

### **Overall repertory grid results**

Taking my repertory grid results as a whole then, perhaps the most marked piece of evidence is that the vast majority of my respondents perceived themselves to

be most like either their best college or non-college friends. This point may appear to be predictable, but is nonetheless significant. In analysing my grids, I found that 18 of those 22 respondents who attended the last stage of interviews felt that they were most like their friends as opposed to any other significant others included on the grid. That is, in identifying where along the continuum they felt they were in relation to the constructs they had identified, their responses most closely resembled those of their friends. The other four responses showed more of a similarity to those answers provided by the respondents brother or sister, who in terms of age can also be perceived as peers.

What is of more interest are the actual specific constellations of constructs which my respondents had in common with their friends. The vast majority of constructs which related to some aspect of consumption, whether it be wearing fashionable items or enjoying the same kinds of music, for instance, proved to glean very similar responses to that of my respondents' friends. In effect, my respondents tended to identify the consuming experience, as an experience which they shared above all else, with their peers. Regardless of the type of consumption concerned, my respondents almost always appeared to see their consumption patterns as being similar to that of their friends. For instance, in the last of the examples I provide in Appendix 8, there is a definite similarity between how this particular respondent perceives herself in relation to significant others, in terms of both musical tastes and a preference for the purchase of clothes (the first and eighth constructs on the grid respectively). Similarly, in example 2 of Appendix 8, the respondent concerned appears to equate wearing smart clothes with being practical and wearing casual clothes with being fashionable; the point here being that peers are perceived as wearing fashionable casual clothes whilst, my respondent's mother, tutor and neighbour are not.

What I could ask at this stage is whether my respondents chose their friends because they had similar tastes or whether they adapted their taste to that of their friends. I would argue that the answer lies somewhere between the two, in as much as consumption provides young people with a realm in which they can negotiate some sense of commonality with their peers.

### **Interview 3: Self-characterisation sketches**

My self-characterisation sketches also provide me with some useful, though perhaps limited, data. What is certain is that consumption was clearly important in the context of the complex group meanings applied to, and drawn from, clothing and other goods by the peer group, as illustrated in the first two phases of the focus groups. Only one of my respondents really seemed to react against this sort of communal consumer culture,

“Elizabeth likes saving money and doesn’t spend it on the crap normal teenagers do... She is very independent and usually a loner which she is very proud of... She likes staying at home rather than going out, so she can spend time with her family. Family is more important to her than friends are.”

It was clear from my focus groups that Elizabeth was not one of ‘the crowd’. She did not talk much, nor contribute to this particular group’s class banter and she wore clothes that did not fit into the group’s conception of ‘trendy’ teenage dress. As such, she was probably the only member of my focus groups who could actually be said to have ‘opted out’ of consumer culture. In effect, Elizabeth can be described as the exception that proves what can only be described as a rather cruel rule. For teenagers, there seems to be a choice that has to be made. That is, between being ‘part of the crowd’ and thereby conforming to the pressures of consumer culture, and opting to live your life away from such pressures. Elizabeth’s example more than any other illustrates how fundamentally



important the decision to invest in consumer culture can be to the identities of teenagers. Young people either implicitly accept the intricacies of peer pressure or choose to live without the positive attributes of peer bonding. It seems a stark choice but one that, not surprisingly, the majority of teenagers have little trouble in making. Only rarely does consumer culture appear to come second best.

Those who emphasised the significance of consumption in their lives reinforced the point I made earlier about limited resources. The following three cases illustrate this well,

“Jack would like to have the money to go shopping, but unfortunately the resources are not available.”

“He shops where ever they sell good stuff cheaply cause he hasn’t got much money.”

“She is very good with money when both saving and spending it.”

Some young people directly acknowledged the unconditional role of shopping and consumption in their lives,

“She buys a lot of her clothes from Top Shop and Top Man and has to buy at least one thing a week.”

The need to purchase consumer goods in order to be part of the crowd continued to be a reoccurring theme; clothes being mentioned in the majority of my groups’ characterisation sketches, while friends were continually acknowledged to have a significant role to play in the lives of virtually all my respondents. There is no doubt that, at least as far as my sample is concerned, friends play an important role in their lives, the contention here is that consumption, most notably in the form of clothes, plays a fundamental role in actively maintaining friendships,

"Jason also likes shopping and wearing the things he buys on weekends 'out on the town' trying to impress the ladies with his charm and humour."

"Most of his money goes towards nights out and buying clothes... he has a wide circle of friends and is very easy to get on with."

"She buys mainly clothes, records and magazines... She likes meeting people and having a laugh."

It is no accident that a large proportion of my respondents mentioned clothes and/or physical appearance as being important. Though I suggested that they should include something in their self-characterisation sketches about what they like, buy and do, they could have chosen a whole spectrum of activities or consumption practices, but clothing was perceived by my respondents, as by far the most important. Clearly the way teenagers dress represents a highly elaborated expression of meaning, in that they find it relatively easy to make very detailed and discriminating distinctions about the things they and their peers wear. In addition, there seems to be a very value-laden dimension to this process, something that came out particularly strongly in the repertory grid exercise. Young consumers seem to perceive that there is a certain amount of 'truth' in terms of dress sense. In other words they do draw upon common cultural capital to decide what is good and what is not. Clothes in effect are celebrated as image makers and the same can be said for other areas of consumption. During their self-characterisations my sample often mentioned their musical tastes and in their grids they continually contrasted what was perceived as an 'in' group with one that had less street cred (eg. The Beatles - The Orb). The suggestion is that teenagers live in a culture where what is acceptable consumer practice is very finely constructed and to operate from outside these constraints is to undermine your credibility as a young person, and therefore your very identity.

On a more general note my characterisation sketches allowed me to collect some interesting data about the actual experience of young people's lives. Quite often my respondents referred to the feeling of pessimism which plays a significant role in their lives, whether this be to do with the inability to afford certain consumer goods or rather more eerie problems,

"Arnold Jackson is 16, he has an optimistic outlook on life but if he's left alone for long enough he begins to think about how he would like to be found dead and spends time planning the perfect murder."

It would be fair to say, I think, that the teenage years often represent a traumatic period in the lives of young consumers. In this context, it would be naïve to over-estimate the significance of consumption as a means of identity formation. Teenagers are subject to a whole spectrum of stresses, strains and personal doubts, and as such research should be wary of over-emphasising the role of consumption in this context. However, the fact that they are often subject only to the *fringes* of consumer culture, according to the guidelines laid down by their peers, and that this in itself involves a certain degree of stress that may well contribute to a degree of self-doubt. The stresses involved in living up to the expectations of peers in the context of consumerism are likely to be significant. In effect, consumerism appears to provide young people with an arena in their lives in which they can escape the traumas of everyday life in a risk society.

## **Discussion**

Before I go on to bring some of the above points together, I want to consider the effectiveness of focus groups in this context. My focus group interviews fulfilled the promise that I identified earlier in this chapter. The group context proved to be absolutely invaluable and I am convinced that it made possible the collection of a richness of data that could not have been matched by one-to-interviews.

Perhaps the major potential problem with the focus group as a tool for research, is as pointed out above, the question of social loafing. There can be no doubt that some respondents were more dominant than others in this situation, but I made a conscious effort to include all members of my groups in my discussions. On the odd occasion when I felt certain individuals were dominating the discussion I would choose a suitable moment and ask a quieter member of the group if they had anything they wanted to say. There is no doubt that my interviews were affected, at least to some extent, by group dynamics, but if anything, such dynamics served to enhance my interviews, in that a point made by a dominant member of a group often encouraged a response from a less out-spoken respondent. On balance, it seems likely that any benefit I would have gained by conducting individual interviews, as far as quieter respondents are concerned, are far outweighed by the benefits of people bouncing ideas off each other in the group setting.

The suggestion that the focus group somehow constructs an artificial environment is counter-balanced by the fact that the very advantage of focus groups is that they go as far as possible within an unnatural setting to make conditions as 'real' as possible. In terms of my research, the interviews were conducted in classrooms that college students regularly attended. They were used to the setting in which my interviews took place.

I should, however, point out that the ability to conduct an effective focus group had to be learnt, and in this respect my pilot focus groups proved invaluable. In particular, my pilot focus groups highlighted the need, on my part, to avoid dominating the discussion. By doing so I was able to allow my respondents to develop their own discussions within the broad framework that I provided and as such they were able to explore avenues that I had not anticipated.

A further practical problem, which I did not mention above, was that of transcription. The fact that ten young people were keen, at any given time, to contribute to issues very close to their personal experience meant that inevitably there was some confusion as to who said what when I came to transcribing my data. However, this problem was minimised by my taking a careful seat plan of who sat where at the beginning of the interview, and by my emphasising the need, during my introduction, for my respondents to talk one at a time.

In retrospect, the only problem of any real significance that I can identify is closely related to the issue of social loafing and group dynamics. That is, there was a danger that my respondents said what they thought should be said in the context of a group interview. On the first count they may have tended towards saying what they thought I, as the researcher, wanted to hear. On the second, they may have been wary of saying anything that they felt went against the grain of the group as a whole. They may for instance, say that they like a particular brand of training shoe, because they know that is what they are expected to say by other members of the group. This may have affected the results collected from one of my groups in particular; a well-established friendship group whose familiarity meant that their individual roles within the group had already been established. In a group where everybody knows each other so well, there is a definite danger that group members will only say what they are comfortable with saying in front of their peers. On the other hand, respondents may feel comfortable saying things in these circumstances that they would not say in front of complete strangers.

As far as Personal Construct Psychology is concerned, before it was possible to administer the approaches which I chose to incorporate in my research, it was necessary for me to familiarise myself, in some detail, with the theory behind the methods. In turn, I also had to learn how to explain effectively the way in which

the tasks concerned should be completed, in a satisfactory manner. This took some considerable time, though ultimately the results I gathered justified this effort. It is true to say that young people can potentially misunderstand the sorts of exercises they are required to complete in the context of Personal Construct Psychology. The terminology being dealt with in this context is relatively complicated. However, with patience and willingness the structure of the tasks can be understood and this was reflected in how my respondents applied themselves to the tasks I gave them. Finally, though the clarity of the constructs my respondents produced varied, without exception they appeared to understand what they were being asked to do and completed the repertory grids and the self-characterisation sketches; both of which provided an invaluable means of complementing the first two phases of my focus group interviews. However, as I will suggest in Chapter 10 this aspect of my research represents merely a taste of what Personal Construct Psychology can achieve in the context of research into consumer meanings.

I will now move on to consider the overall themes which emerged during the three stages of interviews, picking out relevant material from my interviews as I do so. Clearly, the meanings with which young people endow consumer goods are highly complex. The contention here is that though what young people say about what they consume and why they consume it, provides an invaluable framework for conceptualising the relationship between consumption and identity, this can only begin to be established within a broader critical context.

There is no doubt, and I would suggest that the above data speaks for itself in this respect, that young people are quite often discerning consumers. They are not, as Willis (1990) so rightly points out, mere dupes but use consumption in constructive ways. However, these constructions must be understood in the context of the relationship between structure and agency. Young consumers

cannot be *pure* agents in any real sense. This is an issue I will touch upon in the remainder of this chapter; though more authoritatively in Chapter 10.

What can be noted at this stage is the fact that there appears to be considerable evidence to suggest that the teenage consumer creates some sort of equilibrium between his or her concern as to what others think, and his or her own meanings,

Darren: "It's a combination of all things. You wanna buy something you like, you feel comfortable in, and you feel others are gonna like."

What is fundamentally important is that an underlying contradiction can be identified between the critical distance teenagers adopt and the fact that they often fail to acknowledge the fact that they are part of the constraints of consumer culture. As far as most of my respondents are concerned, everybody else but themselves is a victim of the consumer culture. A comment by one of my respondents in particular illustrates this point well.

Gordon: "I've had a quiff for the last five years. Nobody else has. I've never been bothered about it. I started when I was about fifteen. I've never bothered about following anybody else."

Later in the discussion Gordon reiterated this point,

"I didn't get a quiff just to impress everybody because most people don't even like it."

This sort of feeling that individuals are able to sit back and critically reflect on the "consumer sheep" that surround them, is something that pervaded all my groups. Ironically, Gordon was particularly critical of another member of the group,

Ian: "Five of us right and we all had our heads shaved at the same time and we all wear the same kind of clothes and we listen to the same kind of music. We all do the same sort of things of a night. We've all tried thieving at one point or another. Things like that.

Catherine: "Don't you think that's just going for someone like a clone.

Gordon: "Do you all speak like this: "Baaaa."

Ian: "We don't do exactly the same things..."

Reshma: "It depends on the individual I think. Because if you can get on with everyone then you can go round with different people."

Caroline: "Yeah, but to get on with them then you've gotta like the same things anyway obviously 'aren't yer..."

Gordon: "I get on fine with my girlfriend and I don't like any of the stuff she likes. The only thing we like together is the Smiths. I mean I can't stand the same programmes on TV as she does. She likes all the soaps and I hate them. She listens to blumming ravey music some of the time and I hate it."

Gordon fails to come to terms with the fact that he too is subject to the influence of consumerism. He does not acknowledge that by adopting his 50s image he is doing as much to 'follow the sheep' as his friend Ian. The paradox lies in the fact that young people often appear to be convinced that they as individuals are able to be unique, that they can choose who they are as a person, that personally can choose to opt out of mainstream culture. This paradox is well explained by Simmel (1957),

"Whoever consciously avoids following the fashion does not attain the consequent sensation of individualization through any real individual qualification, but rather through mere negation of the social example. If



obedience to fashion consists in imitation of such an example, conscious neglect of fashion represents similar imitation... The man [*sic*] who consciously pays no heed to fashion accepts its forms just as much as the dude does, only he embodies it in another category, the former in that of exaggeration, the latter in that of negation." (p. 307)

By opting, in Gordon's case, to become part of 50s culture, Gordon does little more than reaffirm the powerful ideological influence of consumerism. The illusion of choice apparently makes consumption a powerful player in the construction of identities. The fact is that the extent of personal choice is highly constructed. Young consumers are not able to choose the goods they buy off a clean slate, that slate is already cluttered by the choices that have already been made by their peers, and by the choices made beforehand by producers. Teenage consumers only have personal choice in the context of the parameters laid down for them by the cultural industries. A popular t-shirt amongst teenagers is one with a prominent slogan that reads, "Demand the right to be unique." By wearing that t-shirt young consumers may feel that they are being unique, that they are making a statement. Ultimately, however, that statement is being made by thousands of other teenagers, all of whom are locked into the same paradoxical system of meanings.

By adopting a focus group format I was able to identify a quite distinct anomaly. The contrast between the confidence that my respondents had that they were each able to express their individuality through their consumer goods, and the perception on their part that other teenage consumers conformed to each other, particularly in terms of fashion, was striking. On a more mundane note, perhaps the most important factor to remember in this context is the financial one,

Interviewer: "Does this list (of consumer goods that Paul would like to buy) reflect you as a person in any way?"

Paul: "Yeah. It reflects I'm skint."

I shall conclude by quoting one more exchange from my focus groups. The main line of argument here is that there is significant evidence to suggest that though my respondents were fully aware of the pressures to conform that exist in consumer culture, and though they felt that these pressures had a derogatory effect on their peers, such pressures were seen at a personal level to promote the very individuality that they otherwise suffocate.

Interviewer: "Shannon, you said it's important for people to have certain consumer goods, in what ways do you think these are important to people?"

Shannon: "It's important to fit in with everybody. To fit in more *and* show what you are really like..."

Darren: "You are influenced but I don't think anybody'd buy anything just because their mates wanted something like that."

Louise: "Oh know, I wouldn't."

Tony: "But if you lived on a desert island with nobody else there except a few black natives or something, you wouldn't walk around in Naf Naf coats all the time... You'd wear a pair of jeans and a t-shirt."

To summarise, the evidence seems to suggest that teenage consumers, do, indeed, live on a desert island, but evidently not the island that this respondent describes. Rather, an island of consumerism where they appear to be able to buy whatever consumer goods they choose, according to their own personal tastes; tastes limited only by the extent of the personal resources at their disposal. Here

they can be exactly who and what they please; whilst only the natives are subject to the communal conformities of consumer culture. On this island young people can feel safe from the ravages of the cruel seas that surround them. They can feel free of the risks that underlay what it means to live on a desert island. They cannot however escape from that island, nor from the tentacles of consumerism. And it is in this sense, that consumption fails to provide young people with the service that they demand of it. The risks inherent in social pressures to consume in appropriate ways appear to be as severe as the very risks that young consumers are endeavouring to offset.

Focus group interviews provided an illuminating means of unearthing the complexities that are clearly in evidence in the consuming experience. Though, at this point, I am not in a position to make any authoritative judgements about the relationship between consumption and identity, the potential for using diverse techniques as a means of addressing the meanings young people endow in consumer goods has already been illustrated. However, from a methodological point of view neither the insights provided by focus groups, nor repertory grids and self-characterisation sketches, can stand alone. Indeed, as far as the latter is concerned, the fact that in many cases my respondents were relatively inarticulate meant that these methods could only provide me with a snapshot of consumer meanings. By using such approaches it has, however, been possible to highlight the significance of the sorts of pressures that are imparted upon young people's consuming lives. In order to understand these pressures more thoroughly in the context of the relationship between consumption and identity, in Chapter 8, I will consider data collected from a participant observation conducted in a sports shop.

## Chapter 8

### Participant Observation

#### **Methodological issues**

Having conducted my focus group interviews, it became evident that a number of significant themes were emerging which indicated some form of relationship between consumption and identity. I needed to adopt further research methodologies in order to try and ascertain what that relationship might be. In order to come to terms with the meanings with which young consumers endowed the goods they consume and thereby shed some light on what actually constituted this relationship, a strategic decision was made to conduct a participant observation amongst young consumers. This was felt necessary in order that my research might be as naturalistic as possible, something that was only partially possible within the context of my focus group interviews. It is all well and good for somebody to say that they get confidence from wearing a particular piece of clothing, but where is the evidence for these feelings being invoked in the actual purchasing process?

In weighing up the various options as to where I might conduct my participant observation I considered what it was I actually wanted to find out. What was it that my focus group interviews had not given me that a participant observation could? The fact was that though my interviews provided me with a plethora of data to do with teenagers opinions about the importance of consumption in their lives, what it did not do was address the sorts of meanings applied to the purchase of *specific* items, in any real depth. In the following section I will consider the advantages and disadvantages of using a participant observation as a means of addressing such an issue.

## **Participant observation as a tool for psycho-social research**

Participant observation provides the researcher with an invaluable means of addressing consumer meanings in naturalistic settings. By becoming part of an observed social group it is possible for the researcher to gain first hand knowledge of what constitutes such meanings. As such, as Hammersley (1992) notes, the rationale for participant observation as a research tool is very much based upon a critique of quantitative research. In particular, it reflects the contention that structures are not, in fact, all-powerful, but interact with individual and group-based interpretations of those structures (see Chapter 5). Human beings are constructed by, and construct, complex social processes which are expressed in routine social settings. The suggestion here is that a participant observation is a useful means of addressing the application of meaning in the context of such processes. The first point to make in this respect is that the social world, as Burgess (1984) suggests, is not objective,

“but involves subjective meanings and experiences that are constructed by participants in social situations. Accordingly, it is the task of the social scientist to interpret the meanings and experiences of social actors, a task that can only be achieved through participation with the individuals involved.” (p. 78)

The main benefit of participant observation, then, is its ability to access meanings which participants assign to social situations, by getting actively involved in the *routine* social situation. By conducting conversations with participants, efforts can be made to understand the participants' interpretations of situations and events. Arguably, it is only possible to interpret subjective meanings and experiences by participating with those involved (Schutz, 1967). The value of being a participant observer, therefore, as Burgess (1984) notes, lies in the opportunity made available to tap a rich source of data based upon observations in natural settings.

This emphasis on the naturalistic perspective adopted in a participant observation reflects the fact that accounts of situations (in this case consumer meanings) can be expressed in the individual's own terms, and yet one individual's version of events can be compared with another. It is in this respect that the data gleaned from a participant observation complements that of focus group interviews. In effect, having discussed the nature of my respondents social and 'symbolic' worlds during my focus groups, through participation it became possible for me, to a certain extent, to actually enter that world (Robson, 1993).

As far as this research is concerned, the particular benefit of participant observation, lies in its capacity to contribute a triangulated analysis of consumer meanings. Participant observation can be a useful means of challenging dangerously misleading preconceptions about such meanings, in as much as it becomes impossible to maintain such preconceptions in the face of extended first-hand contact with those people who experience what is under investigation. Description can therefore be integrated with theory. By adopting participant observation methodology in tandem with other approaches, a more rounded and naturalistic understanding of the phenomena in question can be established.

However, there has been much discussion about the 'unscientific' nature of participant observation (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Hammersley, 1992; Robson, 1993). A fundamental objection to participant observation is that the results gleaned from such an approach are, in fact, subjective. Indeed, there is no doubt that participant observation puts a lot of burden upon the individual observer. The ability to conduct an effective participant observation is very much a skill. The observer's own interpretation of what amounts to a significant issue becomes a key variable. In his discussion of ethnography, Hammersley (1992) asks whether or not this sort of an approach can legitimately represent an independent social reality. Hammersley suggests that this question reflects a sea-

change in social scientific opinions as to how far ethnographic approaches can capture the true nature of social life. That is, whereas previously a participant observation would have been lauded as far superior to quantitative methods in this respect, in recent years there has been a divergence towards the feeling that the ethnographic data used is a product of an individual's *participation* in the field rather than a direct reflection of the phenomenon studied. And in this respect, such a conception could be seen to be inevitably constructed through the process of analysis and writing-up (see Tyler, 1985). Indeed, from this point of view the researcher is actually part of the context which he or she is observing and as such can potentially modify the actual research setting (Burgess, 1984). In particular, there is the danger that the researcher might 'go native'; that is, actively adopt the role, and indeed, the values he or she observes in the research setting, to the detriment of the original priority, the actual data collection. Other commentators, notably Habermas (1987), criticise interpretative forms of research for reproducing ideological common sense; thereby neglecting the effects of macro-social factors upon people's behaviour, under the umbrella of capitalism (Hammersley, 1992).

## **Design**

### **i) The Setting**

Having discussed the appropriateness of a participant observation for addressing conventional consumer meanings it is now necessary to consider the background to this aspect of my research. The first task at hand was the identification of an appropriate research setting. The initial decision was made that a shop would provide the most concentrated and focused means of addressing consumer meanings, in that such meanings are apparently uppermost in consumers minds when they are deciding what items they actually want to purchase. Having made this decision, the next stage of the process involved my deciding what criteria should be met by my chosen shop location.

I needed to find a location which met the following criterion in order to ensure the data I collected was as rich as possible:

- 1) A shop whose clientele were predominantly teenage.
- 2) A shop small in size, in order that as complete a picture as possible of the consumer's experience of shopping in that retail outlet might be established.
- 3) A shop that specialised in a quite specific and well-focused product range in order to allow comparison and analysis between goods.
- 4) A shop whose products might have qualities that could potentially shed light upon the issues under discussion.

Bearing these points in mind, and given the significance of brand-names amongst the young people interviewed during my focus group interviews (as well as young people's close identification with high profile sports stars advertising such goods), the sports shop seemed an appropriate context in which to address the meanings with which young people endow consumer goods. As such, I decided to gain access to a sports shop. After having been denied access to one such shop in Huddersfield (due to the fact that the Area Manager concerned did not see my research as "appropriate"), I managed to gain access to another shop that met the criterion I had set. I did so by simply approaching the manager, explaining briefly what it was my research was looking at, and going on to ask if I might work at the shop, unpaid, predominantly on Saturdays, but also on other days I was needed by the manager, over a period of ten weeks. The manager agreed that it would be possible for me to ask discrete questions of the customers without having any undue effect on the every day running of the shop floor. As such, the shop would gain the benefit of an extra worker, notably on the busiest day of the week, whilst I would be able to collect the data required. The shop concerned had the added benefit, as far as my research is concerned, of clearly



targeting the youth market, and therefore provided a purposive sample for the task at hand (see Robson, 1993). For instance, MTV [Music Television] was played throughout the day on a large screen overlooking the store, acting as a magnet which directly encouraged young consumers to enter the shop in order to look at the goods on display.

It was important that the setting for the observation was as naturalistic as possible in order that any pre-conceptions about 'research' on the part of the respondents could be avoided (see Parker, 1974; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The fact that the chain of shops concerned placed particular emphasis on their assistants actively conversing with customers meant that the chosen location proved to be especially appropriate. In the event, far from alienating respondents, attempts to converse with customers were largely positively received, in that customers often appeared to be keen to discuss the things that they bought and the reasons for their particular preferences.

## **ii) Foot Locker in context**

At this stage, I think it is important to provide more specific details about the actual setting of my observation. I had considered keeping the identity of the shop concerned confidential. However, on balance I decided that the discussion of the data I had gleaned would suffer if I were to divorce my findings from the actual shop setting, in that the meanings individual consumers have for the goods they consume can obviously not be completely separated from the perceived 'image' of the setting itself, in this case, a sports shop that has a very particular image which it actively seeks to project to teenage consumers. In the event, what this information told me about the role of retail in teenage consumption was equally as valid, and almost as enlightening, as the data which was more directly concerned with individual consumers' meanings. In addition, the fact that the shop manager had agreed to my referring to his shop in any

subsequent publication, indeed positively encouraging me to do so, reinforced my contention that I should discuss the nature of the actual branch of shops in which I was conducting my observation. In this sense the ethical question of disseminating my findings was not a problem, as long as the individuals concerned were afforded anonymity.

Before I can begin to discuss the data I collected concerning Foot Locker as a site of consumption, it is necessary to consider the business context in which the company operates. The first point to make is that sporting goods represent a massive industry. Indeed, the Chartered Institute of Marketing (1994) report that the total sales of sports clothing in the UK reached a record level in 1993 of £2.1 billion, 9.6% of the total clothing and footwear market. Sports shoes alone account for 21.6% of all footwear. Clearly the sports good industry has far more influence than a purely sports based market would allow. Indeed, the same report states that research conducted by Reebok UK in 1988, found that only 13% of recently bought sportswear was used exclusively for sport, whilst 69% was used mainly for casual wear. The boundary between the sporting and fashion markets have undoubtedly blurred in recent years, so much so that the Chartered Institute of Marketing estimate that approximately 25% of sporting goods , purchased are directly related to sporting activity.

“One feature that distinguishes sportswear (as leisurewear) from previous ranges of casual clothing is the cost to the consumer. Where clothes for lounging around in used to be priced lower than tailored clothes, which had to look good enough for work and formal situations, the ‘designer’ trend introduced expensive casual clothing. Most of the designer logos, or brands that command premium prices have come from the world of sport...” (Chartered Institute of Marketing 1994, p.99)

It is within the context of this increased fashion profile for sporting apparel that my participant observation needs to be considered. Market share cannot be sustained without some minimum standard of quality control.

Foot Locker is an American company and as part of the Kinney Shoe Corporation is owned by Woolworth's, one of the biggest and most powerful retail corporations in the world. The shop was first established as a subsidiary of Kinney Shoes in 1974, and is a prosperous and expanding sports shoe retail outlet. It has over 2000 outlets in the United States alone, and a similar number throughout the rest of the world. Though ever on the increase, there are over 50 Foot Locker stores in Great Britain, and according to the Huddersfield branch manager, the company aims for 200 by the end of 1997. Between 1991 and 1992, Foot Locker's profits from sales more than doubled from £4.5 million to £10.5 million and continue to expand (Chartered Institute of Marketing, 1994). The company prides itself on its customer service and the manager firmly believes that that is what puts Foot Locker ahead of its competition.

"We give the best service, it's not so much the money that's important."

This is an interesting point, because it reflects the supposed intention of the management of Foot Locker to get their employees to actively make an effort to get to know their customers. Foot Locker sales assistants receive a large amount of customer service training and are told that under no circumstances should they approach a customer and say "How can I help you?" The managerial preference is that they ask something like, "Hi, how are you doing today?", altering their tack according to circumstances, and more importantly according to the needs of the customer concerned (much like the participant observer). Indeed, Foot Locker training literature actually describes Foot Locker employees

as 'chameleons', in that they are expected to change and adapt to every situation and to treat each customer as an individual.

The Foot Locker management put a lot of weight on creating an appropriate atmosphere for their customers. This is clearly evident in some of the material published in staff newspapers, such as 'Foot Locker Today' and 'Kinney World'; publications given to me by the branch manager in order that I might establish a broader understanding of the history and context in which Foot Locker and its employees operate.

"The bottom line is... Your team IS the most DOMINANT SALES DRIVEN TEAM in the mall!... The Positive shopping experience that our CORPORATE LIFER encounters at the mall today will keep them, and many more, coming back tomorrow! TEAMWORK WORKS! LET IT WORK! LET IT WORK FOR YOU!!"

"Give the customer something they don't expect. A positive shopping experience will create lifers and new business DECADE AFTER DECADE."

It could easily be argued that this policy is little more than a cynical approach to maximising sales, and to a certain extent this has to be true. However, it is also true to say that the manager of this particular branch believed wholeheartedly that Foot Locker boasted the best customer service in the business. The point here, is that though the clear intention is to sell the greatest number of training shoes possible, the customer is believed to be treated in a less impersonal manner than might be the case in other sports shops. And it was partly for this reason that I received no indication that my presence was seen by customers to be suspicious in any way. Foot Locker employees tend to act in a reasonably

friendly manner. In the end there was a clear intention to make the customer as comfortable as possible. This is reflected by the store's 'lease line operation', those displays which confront the customer, immediately on entering the shop, as is illustrated by a further quotation from the company's training literature,

"From the minute the gate or the door of the store opens one of us must be there to control the lease line. We must position ourselves as close to the lease line as possible... And while we are there on the lease line why not have fun and be a go-getter with an innovative style and creativity. Greeting is not just a job, it is an art, the art of public relations."

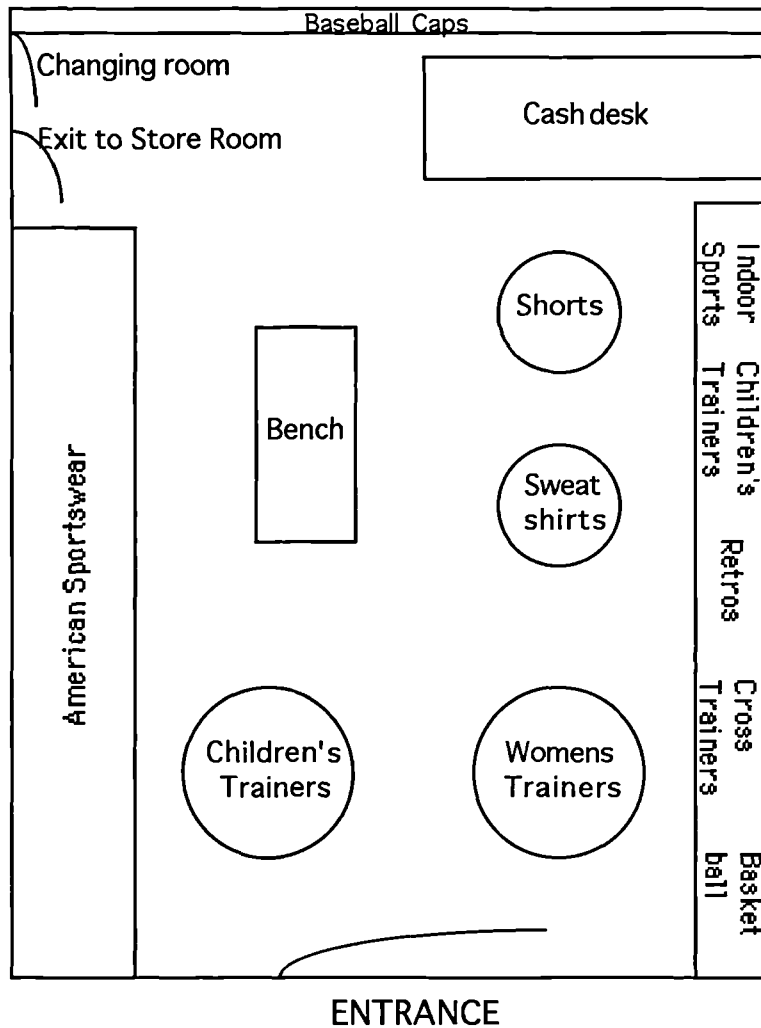
As such there is an unwritten law that all customers should be 'greeted' within three minutes of entering the store.

The shop itself is relatively small in size, about 80 feet by 25 feet in actual selling space (see figure 2). It specialises in selling training shoes, at the higher end of the market. That is, it would be fair to say that in comparison with other sports shops in Huddersfield Foot Locker sells training shoes at the more expensive end of the price scale. For instance, while Foot Locker will sell trainers in a price range from £40 up to £100, JJB, its geographically nearest competitor, will sell shoes at between £20 and £60. Indeed, the manager actually said that,

"JJB are there for economy people... That's not the goal we're going for at all."

The manager claims that Foot Locker has the largest range of training shoes available in Huddersfield. In addition, it sells a range of "sports apparel", a range of sports clothing mainly related to American sports including baseball caps and jackets, basketball shorts and World Cup football shirts. Clothing therefore

**Figure 2: Floor plan of Foot Locker, Huddersfield**



accounted for about 25% of the shops floor space, but probably as little as 10-20% of it's sales. In addition, as a means of attracting customers into the shop, a large television screen holds a dominant position overlooking the shop floor where all customers can both hear and see it.

### iii) Procedure

I spent a total of approximately one hundred hours, over the ten week participant observation, at Foot Locker which is located on the main pedestrian street in the centre of Huddersfield. I discontinued my observation when I felt the data I collected was becoming repetitive. The time I spent working at Foot

Locker gave me direct access to the meanings with which young consumers endow the goods that they consider purchasing and what influences affect the construction of those meanings. It must also be recognised that any such access was tempered by the fact that any customer would perceive me as a shop assistant, and though this may not have created as many barriers as would have resulted from my declaring my role as a researcher, it potentially limited the depth of meaning which I could address. The evidence collected does however illustrate the appropriateness of this particular method as a means of addressing consumer meanings. My intention then, was to talk with customers entering the shop about what it was they were thinking about buying, and why.

Before undertaking my observation, I decided that beyond identifying what sort of customer I wanted to talk to, and what sorts of questions might be used to encourage consumers to talk, it would be a mistake to attempt to structure my observation too closely, in that if I did so this might undermine the benefits I might gain from addressing consumer meanings in a naturalistic setting. My role as a researcher was unknown to customers, and as such it was possible to observe the shop as a site of consumption. Though of course, the other members of staff were aware of my function and as such encouraged me to listen in to their own conversations with customers when they felt that this might be of help to me. In this sense my role as a participant observer can be described as lying somewhere between that of a 'complete participant' and a 'participant as observer' (Robson, 1993).

I undertook all the normal tasks associated with the job of a sales assistant, but whilst doing so observed the setting of the shop concerned and the customers who entered that shop. As such, I was interested to hear what consumers had to say about why they were considering buying a particular item, and any further data that might develop the issues I identified in Chapter 6. Considering the

focus of my research I paid particular attention to young consumers entering the shop, but was also interested in the comments of more mature consumers, and in particular parents, if what they said was relevant to my research question.

It was agreed on my first day working at the shop that I should behave as any Foot Locker Sales Assistant would behave, in that I would wear the standard Foot Locker uniform with name tag and serve customers in the customary fashion. The only difference would be that I would be paying close attention to what the customers had to say about why they were interested in what they were buying. This would often necessitate my asking specific questions of the customers; the intention of which were to address the significance of consumption in their lives, most particularly in relation to the training shoes they were considering purchasing. The meanings that these shoes were endowed with, the role that these meanings played in the construction of personal identities, and the cultural context in which such meanings operated were therefore the issues addressed. For this purpose, depending upon the situation, questions were used as a means of stimulating discussions with customers. For example, customers would be asked what it was that attracted them to a particular pair of training shoes or why they thought that a given brand was popular amongst their peers; a starting point from which the customer might develop the conversation along his or her own lines. Such questions were used flexibly, depending upon the specific customer.

It is also necessary to point out that these questions were sufficiently subtle to avoid customers becoming overly suspicious. In addition, as I mentioned in Chapter 6, it was also important that I considered the ethical implications of this aspect of my research. As such, I did take into account the extent to which the fact that I was observing people without their knowledge, and asking them questions in one guise, as a sales assistant, and using the answers to those



questions in another, as a researcher, was ethical. I came to the conclusion that as long as I was not gathering any degree of personal material then what I proposed to do was reasonable. I also observed the general demeanour of the customers, in terms of their dress and the sorts of trainers they looked at; in addition, if my approaching them caused any alarm at all I would retreat, much in the same way as a full-time member of staff. On the whole, I feel that I was perceived by the customers to be an enthusiastic, arguably over-zealous salesperson, but nothing more. In addition, all material I gathered was dealt with confidentially, the anonymity of my respondents being maintained at all times.

The priority here, then, was for me to encourage the customer to discuss the role that training shoes (and often, as the conversation developed, other types of consumer goods) had in their lives, and what factors might influence that role. As in my focus group interviews, the intention was to allow the customer to set the agenda of the discussion as much as possible. The data was therefore analysed qualitatively according to the assumption that the meanings that consumers express are in themselves worthy of serious consideration within a broadly critical framework. The views presented here are representative of the data collected as a whole.

The manager agreed to letting me write field notes upstairs in the staff room, in between serving customers. My notes consisted of brief outlines of conversations with customers including verbatim quotations alongside any other observations I might have had. The fact that I was often making these notes in between serving customers meant that I had to be swift and therefore expanded upon such notes during a slacker work period.

## **Results**

In this section, I will discuss the broad themes that emerged during my participant observation. In doing so I will address the following concerns: Foot Locker's clientele; the trainer as fashion accessory; the role of the gimmick and the meaning of style. I will then go on to discuss the 'retro' trainer as a particularly vivid illustration of young people's endowment of consumer meanings, focusing, in turn, on a discussion of Foot Locker in the context of postmodernism. The above concerns will allow me to construct a broad understanding of issues related to the meanings endowed in specific consumer goods, and how these meanings relate to the broader cultural context.

### **a) Clientele**

In discussing the evidence I gleaned from my participant observation it might be pertinent at this stage to make some assessment as to the make-up of Foot Locker's clientele. As far as its target population is concerned Foot Locker's own staff literature offers a telling description,

*"Foot Locker offers primarily male customers in up-market households, higher priced, hi-tech, latest state-of-the-art athletic footwear with a support offering of current athletic fashion footwear... It positions itself carefully towards the active recreative sporter, while capitalizing at the same time on the fashionable athlesure market."*

The literature goes as far as to identify the customers that Foot Locker aim to attract:

Primary customer: Male 16-22.

Secondary customer: 23-30 Male/Female.

Tertiary customer: 6-16 Children and 30-40 Male/Female.

These guidelines are partially representative of the sample I encountered during my fieldwork. However, it would be fair to say that, if anything, the extent of customers in the age range 13-16 is underestimated. This was particularly true of Saturday's when teenage customers seemed to be especially prevalent. There is no doubt that a large percentage of Foot Locker's trade, if not the majority, is gleaned from the teenage market. The vast majority of customers I encountered were undoubtedly male, more often than not in their early teens to early-twenties.

#### **b) The trainer as fashion accessory**

Of those customers I spoke to it was very rare for anybody in the 13 - 16 age group to buy training shoes specifically for use whilst playing a particular sport. More often than not, trainers appear to be perceived as fashionable, as opposed to functional, items, and as such are used as means of maintaining face in 'street culture' and in maintaining one's image of who one is in relation to that culture. Foot Locker know this, and their training materials actively encourage employees to be aware of the latest street trends. In this respect sport and fashion have a symbiotic commercial relationship, as illustrated by a further quotation from the company's training literature,

"Another way of staying in touch with the changing customer demands is by merchandising our stores accordingly and by reading sport publications and/or watching popular music videos. This in turn will enable us to see the fashion and sporting interests of the population."

How then is this reflected by the customer? What trends can be identified that might shed at least some light upon the role of consumption in establishing the teenage self-image? First of all, the overwhelming pattern, identified during my participant observation, would indeed suggest that trainers are not usually

purchased in order to participate in particular sports. What is more significant to young people, as was clearly illustrated during my group interviews, is the brand name of the trainer concerned. Teenagers come into the store with a definite street-cred pecking order in mind. Reeboks, Filas, Cons (shorthand for Converse), Adidas, and Nikes are all generally seen to be at the top end of the market; training shoes young people can wear without being embarrassed amongst their friends. Less appealing are Hi-Tecs, Ellessee, Lotto, and of course non-branded trainers produced by shoe shops. At another level, specific 'editions' of training shoes within, for instance, the Nike range, will have particular meanings for teenage consumers. So for instance, a pair of Nike Air's may have a different image to a pair of Air Jordan's.

The significance of the brand-name was well illustrated by one incident involving one of the shop assistants, in his late teens. A middle-aged customer came into the shop and asked why it was that nowhere in Huddersfield stocked the regulation pumps that children have to wear at school. After the customer had left the shop, the shop assistant said,

"because not everybody's an unfashionable geek like you mate! Go somewhere where you can get pumps, maybe you can get a Bic razor there too!!!"

Often it doesn't matter what the trainers look like. What is more important is whether or not they are accepted as being 'street cred'. Bic razors are not a designer item. Like the pumps they serve a minimalist function. They do what they have to do, without the frills. It is those frills that teenage consumers covet. More importantly, those frills do not actually reside in the product itself, but rather in their friends perceptions of the product concerned. In order to expand upon this subject, I asked the same shop assistant what he felt about the prospect

of wearing Hi-Tec's somebody had bought him as a present. He burst into laughter and said,

"Oh yeah! They'd be good for wearing in the garden [mocking smile]. If someone bought me a pair of them I'd go..." [mimics punching someone in the face]

Laughing, he asked a customer in his early teens whether or not he would wear a pair of Hi-Tec's. The curt reply was simply, "No way!" Picking up one of about two pairs of Hi-Tecs in the shop, the assistant went on,

"I mean just look at them, they're tired. If somebody bought me them I'd pull off the stripe so it looks like Nike and write Nike in felt tip pen. Or take 'em back and say I didn't like 'em."

The manager agreed,

"It's just the name. They've got no fashionable street cred. I just wouldn't wear them. It's the name. I can guarantee that if we had two pairs of trainers that were absolutely identical except the name, and if one was Fila and one was Hi-Tec and the Hi-Tec were £10 cheaper, we'd sell the Fila far better. Easy."

Indeed, the lack of street-cred associated with Hi-Tec's was a theme that ran throughout my fieldwork. On one occasion, I suggested to a young customer in his early teens that Hi-Tec's were a good pair of trainers. He laughed out loud, proceeding to look at a pair of Cons, in the old baseball style (which are in fact, reasonably fashionable in their own right) and laughed again. Significantly, it wasn't until his friend pointed out that these were Cons that he said. "Oh yeah, they're alright then." One teenager asked if there was much pressure at school to wear the latest trainers said, "No, though they do look down their nose if you're wearing a pair of Hi-Tecs." Another teenager, asked the same question, replied,

"No, there's no real pressure at school these days. It's more Dockers [Doctor Marten's] that are the in-thing. But if you were to wear Hi-Tec [Broad grin]... You couldn't wear Hi-Tec. Adidas, Nike they're the brands."

This appears to reflect the tendency, identified during the course of my focus group interviews, for young people to deny the existence of any pressure to buy particular trainers and yet to readily become involved in the craze to buy them. Though there cannot be any doubt that there is peer pressure to buy certain pairs of trainers, this pressure does not mean to say that they haven't got a considerable personal investment in purchasing these goods. They feel good about wearing a good pair of trainers. From this point of view, it could perhaps be argued that the role of peer pressure in this process is purely incidental, in that it represents a means to an end, the end being a feeling of self-worth.

The significance of name brands was further illustrated by a mother of a young girl about two or three years old who said that she could only buy a pair of Reebok's for her child, because only they were good enough as far as her daughter was concerned. But it is not the brand itself that appeals, it appears, amongst teenagers at least. Rather, it's what might be described as the 'common cultural capital' that pervades youth culture. The common idea that a particular pair of trainers are the 'in' thing. For instance, a young man about sixteen or seventeen years old was asked which brand of trainer he preferred. He replied that he preferred Nike Air's, a very expensive running shoe with an air cylinder in the sole to cushion the running action. When I asked why this was so, his reasoning was that, "They're common." Far from wanting to express their individuality *per se*, through their clothing, it seems that teenagers are more concerned with establishing their individuality according to youth cultural parameters that are already well-established and therefore involve minimal risk on their part; that is, by ensuring that they adopt a look that fits in with their

peers. It could be argued therefore, that rather than piecing together a postmodern identity from the wide variety of options on the marketplace, rather than pursuing their individuality, teenagers construct their identities, at least in terms of consumer goods, from the most pervasive goods available. This is an issue I will consider shortly, in the context of postmodernism.

### **c) The role of the gimmick**

As Rickey (1996) argues,

“The air pumps and ergonomic soles serve little function when all you are doing is bouncing around on a dancefloor or running for the bus. So, despite increasing use of technology, it is fashion, not function that rules the market.” (p. 16)

The hunger for the latest trend and the latest gimmick in trainers is well exploited by the manufacturers. When asked, young teenagers often said that it was the gel inset (a lump of gel implanted in the sole of the trainer to allow the basketball player to pivot on the spot to maximum effect) that attracted them to a particular training shoe, despite also acknowledging that they never, in fact, intended to play basketball. Other such gimmicks include extra arch supports, and perhaps the classic of the genre, lights on trainers' heels which flash on impact with the ground. Supposedly, for night time running, these trainers are sold in particular quantity in sizes for small children who are attracted to the flashing lights, immediately they enter the shop (see figure 2). The manufacturers know full well, first and foremost, that they can depend upon the 'street cred' of their name, and secondly that in order to keep ahead of the competition they need to develop the most innovative gimmicks. As such, these manufacturers bring in new lines and innovations on a seasonal basis, four times a year. Teenagers, are attracted to these superficialities, as a means of expressing who

they are to their friends. If someone came to school, for instance, and were to show off his or her gel inset's they would be perceived as being an "alright sort of guy" [respondent's quotation] by their friends, and they would feel better as a person as a result. This being despite, or perhaps because of the fact that that person is in no way asserting his or her individuality, but rather, the communal identity of fellow 'street-cred' teenagers.

#### **d) The meaning of style**

It seems that it is irrelevant how *untrendy* a pair of trainers actually are. If those trainers are worn by the *right* people then they'll become trendy (the object of trendiness can obviously vary geographically). For example, one of the shop assistants said that if I were to wear a pair of Reebok Classic's, a very basic pair of old-fashioned all-white tennis shoes, I would look really "boring and straight". On the other hand, if a homeboy (a 'street cred', usually black, 'mate',) were to wear them,

"Then that's cool. Cos he's like tryn'a be different and that's alright. But not for someone like you."

In effect, it is the meaning that friends have for what you wear on your feet that is more important for the individual's identity than his or her own meanings. The most basic and unfashionable trainer can be endowed with meanings that make it a street-cred item. Anybody with a modicum of street-style can wear such an item with the confidence that they are projecting to their friends who it is they are. The only problem is that such a modicum cannot be constructed from scratch, and as a result a particularly stressful and risky situation develops for socially isolated young people, like Elizabeth, whose anti-consuming sentiments I discussed on pages 174 - 175.



The importance of trainers as a means of constructing identities are not however, restricted to the wearer of the trainers alone. On one occasion a whole family came into the shop to buy a pair of Fila's for a young boy aged 4 years old, to match his new outfit. The father of the child, a young man in his early twenties even mocked his son, saying that he too was going to purchase a pair of Fila's, only bigger and better than his son's. It is almost as if the parents were wanting their child to project a particular image; an image that reflected well upon them, and one that reinforced who they were, more so than the boy himself. In effect, it appears that in late capitalist culture, consumption has come to take on an increasingly socio-cultural role in the structuring of everyday life. The consumption of training shoes does not merely allow the wearer to feel comfortable, in a functional sense. It actively engenders confidence in the individual as somebody who qualifies as a fully fledged member of a way of life which is proffered as legitimate, by capitalism itself.

Another example of this process, is that of a young white couple, who were searching for a "name" pair of trainers to match their three year old son's click-suit; a click-suit [a highly street-cred dungaree suit]. They were very keen that their young son should have 'street-cred', that somehow their son should reflect what they aspire to look like, even if they did not have the resources to do so. This was not an isolated case, many young parents, even of young babies, came in looking for a particular make of training shoe to suit their child and thereby *their* own identities as parents. Somehow their children become an extension of their own selves, in that by dressing their children in a street-cred fashion, they appear to be expressing their own identities. In effect, they are able to tell the world that they fit into the criteria of acceptability that have been laid down by the ever more versatile reincarnations of consumer capitalism. This illustrates the apparent potential that consumer goods have as resources in the construction of identities.

Clearly, image represents an important part of a teenagers identity. This point has been reinforced by my participant observation. Groups of teenagers would regularly come into the shop, in readily identifiable groups. For instance, they might all wear 'retro' trainers, American football gear, or Adidas sportswear. But it is not just what you wear that matters, but how you wear it. In the case of trainers, for instance,

"They wear 'em [trainers] dead baggy like. A lot of the time they don't actually fit."

"Nobody wears 'em tied up anymore. Nobody. If they're untied then at least you don't have to tie them up again if they get untied."

The extent to which the wearer is uncomfortable is irrelevant. It is the image that is portrayed and the identity gleaned from that portrayal that is important.

It must also be noted that the financial commitment that the significance of being street cred has for many teenage consumers is not insignificant. Teenagers, on the whole, do not have considerable amounts to spend, and as such, to become embroiled in consumer culture amounts to what is a significant commitment. It was not unusual for groups of young people to come into the shop, literally counting up the pennies, in order to reach the value of the price tags on Foot Locker shelves. Many teenagers seem to see this as a worthwhile investment. Alternatively, parents are often the ones that suffer from the need on the part of teenagers to maintain their identity through keeping up with their friends in the trainers 'stakes'. A young mother discussed the situation she had to suffer as regards four product-hungry children,

"They're crazy at his school. One month they all wear Reeboks. The next month it's Nike. It's like that for everything. Like Mega Drives and stuff. They will have to keep up with their friends and who pays? I'll have to

take a mortgage out on the house. I've got four children and they have to take turns. This month it's his turn [Looks at son]. I'll have to buy you a bike next month."

Yet, despite the financial commitment that having four children in a consumer-oriented culture entails, the mother surprisingly seemed more than prepared to find the appropriate resources. She seemed to accept that this was a necessary part of being a modern mother, and that it was also part of growing up for young children in the 1990s. If they wanted something then if possible they should have it. Indeed, in this respect, it could well be argued that consumer capitalism appears to thrive, precisely because of its chameleon-like ability to reinvent itself, thereby convincing consumers that it provides the only culturally acceptable means of establishing yourself as an individual. The pressure on parents is immense as another mother confirmed,

"It's really annoying. They come in here with all these trainers (looks around) and if they're not *the* ones to wear it's no good."

Though this participant observation was limited to the setting of a sports shop and therefore predominantly focused on training shoes, it would also be fair to say that once teenagers become especially attached to a particular brand of trainer, this has a broader implication for their consumption habits. The manager, for instance, commented that,

"If they like Fila, they'll like everything Fila do just about."

If a teenager purchases a pair of Fila trainers, it is quite possible that, influenced and encouraged by his or her friends, he or she will construct what appears to be a readily identifiable identity around other Fila products, such as track suits, caps

and sweatshirts. This complete image provides a means of acceptance within the peer group.

#### **e) The exemplar of the 'retro' trainer**

Perhaps the most vivid example of this process is evident in the current popularity of 'retro' trainers. Shorthand for retrospective or retro-chic, 'retros' are trainers that were originally popular in Britain during the early 1970s (although originating from 1950s America), and though they are beginning to lose their ultra-fashionable edge, they still command a dominant place on sports shop shelves. Trainers from the 1970s have been singled out in this fashion, partly because of the simplistic styles that they incorporate, but also as a result of the fact that trainers manufactured any earlier than those from the 1970s would not be sturdy enough for modern everyday use (Windsor, 1993). The resurgence of this style of training shoe started in America in the late 1980s and all the major manufacturers now produce their own models (eg Adidas: 'Gazelles', 'Sambas', Puma: 'States', Converse: 'All Stars'). In addition, further brands such as Vans, Simplex and Superga, targeted specifically at the 'retro' market, have emerged. Indeed, in terms of my participant observation 'retros' were by far and away the best selling trainers in the shop. According to the manager, the Gazelle accounts for over 5% of Adidas' overall sales (a vast amount when you consider that Adidas produce hundreds of models of trainers a year, as well sports clothing, football boots, replica shirts and so on) and according to the manager, Adidas intentionally avoid flooding the market with Gazelles, in order to maintain demand at a particular level. They thereby avoid the mistakes made by Puma towards the end of the 1980s, when they flooded the market with Puma 'States', thereby undermining their products cult status (Windsor, 1993). The shop manager was well aware of the need to maintain such a privileged market.

"If everybody buys 'em nobody'll want 'em in three years time will they?"

This branch of Foot Locker, at least, just could not keep up with the demand for 'retro' styles. The trainers themselves tend to be suede and in bright colours, blue, red, and green. The rarer the colour the more desirable the shoe, as Windsor (1993) points out. Although, in this context, it must be said that rarity is a relative term, in that individual meanings for such rarity can only be applied in the context of the vast numbers of any one model that are available on the market as a whole, at any one time. Originally used as basketball boots, 'retros' are now self-evidently a fashion shoe. They give the minimum of support to the foot and many customers trying them on, describe them as uncomfortable and yet proceed to buy them (although it must be acknowledged that the occasional customer described their slim fitting as comfortable). These are the most basic of training shoes, but retail at between £40 and £60 a pair. In this respect, they might be described as 'retrograde', a reactionary reversion to the past, whereby you actually pay for the *lack* of quality. One customer said that he had bought a pair of Gazelles two years ago for £20, but now they were retailing at £50.

If anything the excessive price tag acts as an extra incentive for young consumers to buy the product. In fact, it seems that according to any reasonable measure of quality 'retro' trainers have very little going for them. I asked one customer, a twenty year old male if he liked the Adidas 'retro' trainer, the 'Gazelle.' His answer was that,

"Well they're a bit shifty them, aren't they. A bit too old like."

This, however, is the irony about 'retro' styles. People like them precisely *because* they are 'naff'. It is that 'naffness' that has made them so fashionable (a similar example of this process might well be the inexplicable popularity of the Naf Naf range of clothing, amongst young teenagers. Though apparently lacking in style, this brand of clothing caught on amongst teenagers as a result of living up to its

name so effectively). It is often not the style of the product that matters to teenagers, but rather, the meanings with which that product is endowed by their peers. One customer even said of Gazelles that, "For me they wear out too quick", and yet he still admired the display for several minutes. As the manager pointed out, it just seems that teenagers "get an image in their head and that's it..." Indeed, one customer, a female in her late teens went as far as to say that,

"They wear 'em if they like 'em or not don't they?"

During my observation of those customers that expressed interest in 'retro' trainers, it became clear that a very definite 'style' of teenager wears 'retro' gear. On the whole they tend to be in their late teens and are closely related to the clubbing or dance 'scene'. One customer explained,

"Well, it's like to do with the seventies. Like groups playing the Starsky and Hutch theme and stuff like that. It's street culture, a culture like. And it's all to do with music as well."

People apparently wear 'retro' training shoes, not for the way they look but for what they feel that they say about them as a person. One customer said that he bought Gazelles every three months because, "they're class trainers". He wears them for football, but not to play football, rather to watch it on the terraces, and they are apparently very popular amongst the football "crowd". Alternatively, another customer in his late teens said that Pumas, another 'retro' trainer were identified with the Hip-Hop movement. In effect, it seems that 'retros' identify young consumer with particular youth cultural styles. Perhaps 'retro' trainers give young consumers a feeling that they 'belong' in a culture that very rarely makes them feel that way in other aspects of life. They may not feel that they have much in common with their families. They may feel alienated from their local communities. They may be wary of the confrontational commitment

involved in becoming a skinhead or maybe a punk; but by adopting particular aspects of a youth-cultural style, aspects that express some form of belonging to a sub-cultural form, teenagers can construct some sort of sense of who they are without committing themselves to a complete youth cultural lifestyle.

When asked why it was they liked 'retro' styles customers invariably looked at me with a bemused grin on their faces, as though they genuinely didn't actually know what it was about the actual shoe, other than the image that surrounded it, that attracted them. It was almost as if customers were embarrassed by the fact that they were expressing interest in 'retros' for youth cultural reasons; as opposed to personal aesthetic taste,

"Well everybody wears 'em don't they. They're just... Well... smart."

One customer, asked what it was about Gazelles that appealed to teenagers, replied that,

"They're just different. That's what I think. I like 'em 'cos they're plain."

A definite paradox can therefore be identified here. Though teenagers know that they are buying consumer goods that represent a very popular trend amongst their peers, and although they realise that they are following the crowd, they justify this by convincing themselves that they, personally, are different to the majority. For instance, in discussing the attraction of 'retro' trainers, though one customer recognised that his friends owned similar items, he chose to concentrate on the fact that he had chosen a particular colour, which was different to that of his friends. Such a sense of uniqueness is fostered by the idea that the meanings consumers apply to such goods are individualistic, when in reality those meanings are, to some extent, inevitably communal. Even

consumers that don't like 'retros', seem to have convinced themselves that they do,

Shop manager: "Do you like Gazelles?"

Young woman: "Oh no, I don't like them. Well, I do, but too many of me mates wear 'em."

#### **f) Purchasing the *postmodern* self?**

In considering these sorts of issues it is necessary to briefly discuss their significance in relation to the broader debate over cultural aspects of the debate surrounding postmodernity. Would it be fair to say that teenage consumers are, in effect, adopting postmodern identities, choosing from the menu of life to construct their identities, at least partly through the products available in the marketplace?

The first point to make is that in the context of the setting in which I undertook my observation, it was possible to identify what might be described as archetypal postmodern features. It was interesting to note, for instance, the important role that MTV played in creating the atmosphere that Foot Locker are keen to promote. MTV is a satellite music television station primarily dependant upon music videos. As Wollen (1986) points out, the significance given to videos, as advertisements for the products the music industry has to offer, mean that MTV is an important vehicle for the industry as a whole. In turn, MTV also has an important role to play in the extent to which it epitomises the street style of contemporary culture. Fashion has clearly always had a relationship with pop music, and as Wollen (1986) suggests, with the packaging of artists, such as David Bowie or Annie Lennox, as images. MTV has taken this trend one step further by emphasising the relationship of such fashions to the street. A particularly good example of the relationship between MTV and fashion, and in



this instance, 'retro' gear, is the group Blur, whose image is very much dependant on a nostalgic image incorporating 'retro' styles and whose very name, it might perhaps be argued, could be seen to mimic the blurring of representational boundaries in a postmodern world.

Commentators on postmodernity (e.g. Featherstone, 1991; Kellner, 1992) often refer to MTV as representing the archetypal media enactment of postmodernism. MTV is seen as promoting the image at the expense of narrative, as highly expressive aesthetic images become the centre of fascination for the viewer, for whom, the experience of watching MTV is little more than a transient bombardment by image after resplendent image. Tetzlaff (1986) sees MTV as a mirror image of the ideal postmodern text,

"Fragmentation, segmentation, superficiality, stylistic jumbling, the blurring of mediation and reality, the collapse of the past and future into the moment of the present, the elevation of hedonism, the dominance of the visual over the verbal" (p.80)

In British Foot Locker stores MTV plays a central role. A large screen towering over the retail space holds a dominant position, as passers by are encouraged in by loud music that constantly changes in both style and pitch. One minute rap star Snoop Doggy Dog will be singing, adorned in his Fila trainers and Adidas cap; the next, attention will be focused on an awards ceremony during which Hollywood stars discuss their personal opinions on the crossover between rap music and folk. Customers would regularly come into the shop, often visibly attracted by MTV, thereby looking at the screen for two or three minutes, before proceeding to scan the shelves (perhaps even looking for the very pair of trainers that Snoop Doggy Dog was wearing).

MTV portrays the sort of lifestyles that many of the teenage consumers that come into Foot Locker actively aspire to. Particularly popular at the Huddersfield branch is the Rap Show on MTV which is actually videoed so that it can be replayed during shop hours. The images presented on this show are of streetwise rappers wearing all the latest fashions and 'hanging out' on the street with their 'homeboys', maybe having a makeshift game of basketball to pass the time. MTV is escapism. When a young consumer comes into Foot Locker he or she might well aspire to the sort of 'street cred' street life portrayed by the images on the screen. The 'street-icons' appearing in their latest videos or presenting the latest award legitimise a lifestyle that prioritises the significance of style, and thus of a consumer-oriented lifestyle; a lifestyle that prioritises the significance of the latest pair of street-cred training shoes. Clearly, this has implications, both for the profit margins of Foot Locker and the ways in which teenagers perceive the role consumption has in their lives. The significance of media figures in exculpating the wearing of expensive training shoes as a means of self-expression was further illustrated by two young girls in their early teens, when I asked them why they thought 'retro' trainers were so popular,

"Because Robbie Williams wears them."

"Robbie Williams from Take That. He's the sexiest man on earth."

But it is not just which pop icon that wears the good concerned that is important, but also the meanings which that particular person endows in such a good. For instance, Windsor (1993) quotes from an article in *Sky*, a teenage style oriented magazine, in which Kate Moss, the so-called 'super-model', discusses the fact that she has five different pairs of 'retro' trainers, all of which can be worn with anything from a man's suit to a black evening dress. The important point to note here, and one that postmodern discourses are likely to neglect, is the fact that the majority of young people simply do not have the resources to partake in these

sorts of multiple meanings. They are hardly likely to be able to afford more than one pair of 'retros', let alone a man's suit. Although the diversity of meaning is lauded as a distinct possibility in consumer culture, such a possibility is rarely matched by mundane everyday realities.

There might also be an argument for suggesting that 'retro' style training shoes represent a peculiarly postmodern form of consumption. That is, it could be suggested that the meanings with which young people endow their Adidas Gazelles, reflect postmodern sensibilities, notably in the way in which by wearing training shoes that originate in the 1970s young people are ransacking the past, a tendency often discussed by postmodern commentators (e.g. McRobbie, 1994; Willis, 1990). What is important in this sense is the fact that consumers have a playful detachment to the past which they mimic,

"retrochic... is playful and theatrical in the way it appropriates artefacts and uses them as icons or emblems. According to the theorists of postmodernism, retrochic differs from earlier kinds of period revival in that what it does is parodic. It is irreverent about the past and only half serious about itself. It is not concerned with restoring original detail, like the conservationist, but rather with decorative effect - choosing objects because they are aesthetically pleasing, or 'amusing', rather than because they are authentic survivals of the past." (Samuel, 1994, p.95)

What makes 'retro' styles stand out, as Fraser (1981) notes, is their inherent realisation that the way clothes actually look is essentially unimportant. What is significant is who looks at them and therefore what they mean. Retro-chic therefore fits in especially nicely into the style driven context in which young people live. The originality of the style is especially important. For instance, Adidas Superstars which re-entered the market in the 1980s, actually bore a

sticker marked 'originals' in order to reiterate such authenticity (Windsor, 1993). As far as the sportswear industry is concerned 'retros' are actually referred to as "authentic" (see Rickey, 1996). In the context of postmodern debates 'retro' styles are therefore perceived to be an expression of both the current vogue for nostalgia and the eclectic and haphazard use of nostalgia for contemporary meanings (McRobbie, 1994), whereby all sentimentality for the past is lost in favour of the bizarre juxtaposition of taste (Samuel, 1994). What I want to consider here, and in more detail in Chapter 10, is the extent to which such meanings are eclectic, and whether or not, in fact, the opposite can be argued. That is, that nostalgic forms of consumption, in this instance in the form of 'retro' styles, actually reflect the stabilising role of consumption in contemporary consumer culture.

In this context, the glib recognition of MTV as symbolic of a postmodern world is essentially misleading. First of all, the ideological role of MTV is neglected, amidst the superficialities of textual analysis (Goodwin, 1992). The relationship between consumption and production is thereby lost amidst a haze of postmodern discourse. The modern ideological impact of consumerism, in general, is therefore neglected. The limitations inherent in seeing 'retro' styles as, unproblematically postmodern are discussed briefly by McRobbie (1994) who suggests that the pastiche that is undoubtedly evident in these forms of dress are best understood within the context of the development of post-war youth sub-cultures. I would extend this point by suggesting that what is important here are not the sub-cultures themselves, but the fact that the evolution of consumer capitalism itself lies at the root of their demise. 'Retro' styles, as a metaphor for youth consumption, have emerged in the late twentieth century as a focus for youth lifestyles precisely because no viable alternative is offered. Youth sub-cultures have declined not necessarily through lack of interest or motivation by young people, but partly as a result of the ability of capitalism to expand into

new areas, notably into the lives of young people. In effect, consumerism has been lauded as the be-all and end-all of the youth experience, at the cost of undermining the anti-consumerist ideals of post-war youth sub-cultures.

What seems to be important here is that there appears to be a trade off being constructed between the structural influences of consumer capitalism and the everyday meanings which are invested in those experiences. Thus, whilst the consumer can depend upon the certainty that 'retro' styles of consumption already have historical precedents, as a consequence less creative work, and by implication risk, is required on the part of the individual consumer. It is in this sense that consumption appears to offset some of the risk taking that young people experience in other aspects of their everyday lives (see Chapters 4 and 10).

It might be argued that 'retro' gear gives the young person the sense that he or she is able, at least to some extent, to usurp the market. 'Retros' appear to be most popular amongst young people in their late teens. As such, by adopting such styles an individual can purport to be anti-consumerist, in the sense that far from being symbolic of consumerism in the 1990s, to the consumer, the historical dimension inherent in these goods can actually be taken to counteract contemporary forms of consumption. On the other hand, the producer has the security of basing a new market on the needs of an old one, thereby reducing costs and maximising profits. The market is perfectly willing to put up with this partial subversiveness, indeed positively embraces it. The fact that the consumer appears to be obliged to construct meanings within the criteria the market sets down means that ultimately the market itself can only prosper. In this sense, Johnston's (1993) point that youth culture became primarily concerned with style as its importance as a consumer group was recognised, is only partially correct. 'Retro' styles are interesting precisely because they do have an pro-active

ideological element. It is just that this ideology is subsumed by the far more powerful ideology of consumerism.

In the context of postmodern culture then, it could be argued that a culture dominated by short sharp shocks of imagery, in turn, encourages teenagers to establish their identities in terms of the short sharp gratifications available to them through consumer goods. This process is perpetuated by the fear of losing face amongst peers. But the question I want to begin to raise is whether such goods can fulfil this promise. Indeed, the important point to make here, is that far from being completely free to pick and choose an identity from whatever aspects of life an individual might choose; in the end, the evidence seems to suggest that the restraints of everyday life, and in particular the significance of peer group influence, and therefore of a “street-cred” lifestyle (which itself is embedded in an ideological framework), is so pervasive as to render the choice of identities as highly constrained. What is more, the choices available on the marketplace are so highly constructed to make the extent of this choice, at best, illusory. Teenagers are not free to choose if they want to construct their identities around their involvement in a particular sport, their relationship with their parents, or their membership of a youth club, because they have too much to lose if they do so. The need to ‘fit in’, the need to be ‘one of us’, has determined that consumer goods, and perhaps most visibly training shoes, have become a means to an end in establishing young people’s identities. Whether this has significant implications for individual identities in the long-term is another question altogether (see Chapter 10).

## **Discussion**

Having discussed the data collected during my participant observation, and before I bring the above concerns together, I will briefly consider the advantages

and disadvantages of the above participant observation in the context of my overall research questions.

I would suggest that this method provides the researcher with an invaluable means of addressing consumer meanings in naturalistic settings. My participant observation did allow me access to routine social situations in which a wide variety of consumers were prepared to express the meanings with which they endowed consumer goods. I was, in effect, able to observe a naturalistic environment, and in turn, the active expression of some of the consumer meanings which had been alluded to during my focus group interviews.

The claim that participant observations are essentially unscientific is misleading. The intention of a participant observation is not to be scientific, but to tap a rich source of naturalistic data. This, as I hope to show in discussing the data I gathered, is what this phase of my research has achieved.

The criticism that a participant observation is the product of the researcher's involvement rather than a direct reflection of reality does not necessarily apply in this case, in as much as, though I worked as a sales assistant, I did not as such, actively alter the experience of those consumers I observed and as such did not alter the actual research setting. In practice, I behaved no differently to my fellow sales assistants. This situation was compromised, however, on one occasion when one of my colleagues told a customer that I was a researcher and was interested in what she might have to say about the training shoes she was buying for her daughter; this, despite my informing my colleagues, that I did not want my research role to become known by the customers, in order to ensure that my findings were as rich as possible. I reiterated this point to the colleague concerned once the customer had left the premises.

As far as 'going native' is concerned, on occasions I would become over-involved in the actual sale of a pair of training shoes. Achieving a sale often gave me some satisfaction despite the lack of any financial incentive (the other sales assistants worked partly on commission and were therefore very keen to put my successful sales through the till). As such, I became gratified by the fact that I felt I was doing a good job. However, though this may, to an extent, have involved my 'going native' in that on occasions I may have expounded the qualities of a particular pair of training shoes, this had no direct consequence as far as the actual results of my observation were concerned.

However, it should be pointed out that the intention of ethnographic research, and of this research in particular, is to explain, as well as describe behaviour. In this respect I would describe this aspect of my research as a 'critical participant observation' (see Hammersley, 1992). I am not suggesting that this research is potentially emancipating in any way, but that it pays attention to the ideological and structural factors that underlay agentic experience. That is, though collected objectively, the evidence gleaned through the participant observation can be used as a means of constructing an overall picture of what constitutes the relationship between consumption and identity in contemporary society, bearing in mind the ideological implications of these processes.

Recognising that the ideological element to the consumption question is in itself important, it is worth noting at this stage that traditionally, participant observations have tended to focus on deviant youth cultural groups (eg Whyte, 1955; Parker, 1974). With very few exceptions (e.g. Fine, 1979) the experiences of apparently less dramatic social groups have been under-utilised. This reflects a general theme that has run through this thesis. Namely, that by focusing on minority experiences, such as the focus of youth researchers on youth sub-cultures for example (see Widdicombe and Woofitt, 1995), the true significance of



social phenomena such as consumption are potentially misconstrued and arguably, even underestimated. Fine's (1979) work on the 'idioculture' of little league baseball teams illustrates the potential of a naturalistic approach, to what in effect are routine naturalistic settings. That is, what I am arguing here, is that the benefits of focusing qualitative research on the experience of 'conventional' social groups is potentially more enlightening than non-generalisable findings on marginal social groups, whose settings may be 'natural' for that particular group, but not for social experience in general. In effect, as the above data illustrates social life is not merely about drug-taking and gang-life. The more mundane routine aspects of young people's lives represent research resources that have the potential to enlighten the most fundamental of social scientific concerns.

The actual data which I collected during the course of my participant observation reinforced many of the findings that emerged from the focus group phase of the research. The importance of the peer group as a framework within which the cultural capital of consumption is engendered was a constant theme. By conducting a participant observation, it became possible to begin to establish a critical analysis of such thoughts in the context of a specific meaning-endowed product range. In particular, I was able to begin to consider how it is that, consumer capitalism reinvents itself and thereby maximises the benefits available to it through the youth market; an issue that will be expanded in Chapter 10.

At this stage the suggestion that training shoes are, in some respects, an 'easy target', in as much as they represent an extreme example of a luxury image-driven, and fashion-intensive product, should be addressed. My argument here is that what is important about such fashion-intensive products is the very fact that they are in themselves such an important means of self-expression for young people. The routine use of training shoes is an important focus in as much as it illustrates how important such fashionable goods are to young people's everyday

experience. What is critical to such experiences are the tension that exists between the feeling of uniqueness that young consumers construct through such goods, alongside the simultaneous feeling that they belong; whilst all around them are perceived as being little more than consumer sheep. The importance of this paradox is illustrated by the fact that though during my participant observation young people did not always come into the shop in groups, the pressures that were on them to conform in certain ways, and the personal meanings that they garnered from such conformity, were constantly in evidence.

Clearly, it would be an exaggeration to say that all young people's identities are subject to the influences of consumer culture. Many teenagers, no doubt, have no interest at all in what are the latest pair of 'street-cred' training shoes amongst their friends. Rather, the argument here is that enough teenagers are likely to be more than prepared to become embroiled in the sort of cyclical process I have described to determine that it should be of some concern to the social scientist.

In effect, young people are able to buy into a youth cultural style that gives them some sense of stability in an unstable world. They are also able to maintain some sense of individuality by choosing a particular colour scheme from the varieties, made available on the marketplace. In this sense, young people can have their communal cake and eat it. They can maintain social stability, alongside psychological independence. However, regardless of the extent to which individual or group-based creativity is engendered in a pair of 'retro' trainers, those trainers are equally symbolic of the structures of consumer capitalism. Hence, a super-model advocates the stylistic qualities of 'retro' trainers, whilst simultaneously regenerating the very structures that depend upon such qualities being perpetuated, despite young people having limited resources with which to partake in the actual experiences that consumer capitalism offers them. Similarly,

MTV entertains, but it also perpetuates ideas about what the world is about. Such ideals appear to actively incorporate an ideology of consumerism.

Interaction is undoubtedly crucial to any understanding of the role of consumption in contemporary society. The meanings with which consumer goods are endowed by consumers, though personal in one sense of the word, are essentially communal. In effect they provide a resource which binds together a young person's everyday life. But that resource answers, to some extent, to the ideological underpinnings of a consumer society. Social and cultural change have had a definite impact on what it is to experience everyday life in contemporary society. Consumer goods have a central role to play in this process, as has the market that produces them.

Earlier, I suggested that a primary benefit of participant observation was its ability to cut through notions of structure, in order to establish conceptions of individual and group-based meanings. A certain methodological irony can be identified here. In retrospect, the main benefit of conducting a participant observation in a sports shop appears to be that the *structural* factors which interact with such meanings have been visibly highlighted. Consumer meanings, are not constructed in isolation, but in negotiation in cultural and commercial contexts. In this sense the sport shop operates as a half-way-house between the consumer and consumer capitalism.

As such, the questions remain. Is the fact that young people gain pleasure out of the goods that they consume, and the fact that, at least in some sense, this helps them to maintain a sense of their self-worth, in itself something that should be commended or rebuked? Do consumer meanings actually actively construct young people's identities in any real sense, or are their identities merely the products of a consumer ideology? What, in effect, constitutes the relationship

between consumption and identity in contemporary consumer culture? This chapter has helped me to move one step nearer to addressing these concerns. In Chapter 9, I intend to develop my analysis further, in the context of a Consumer Meanings Questionnaire which specifically addresses the meanings with which young people endow consumer goods which they personally identified as giving them particular pleasure. Consequently, in Chapter 10, I shall be in a position to consider the above questions more directly.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Consumer Meanings Questionnaire**

#### **Methodological issues**

Chapters 7 and 8 discussed the material I collected during the first two stages of the research process. In what follows, I want to go on to consider the data gathered in the third stage of my research, namely my Consumer Meanings Questionnaire. Before I go on to discuss the design of my questionnaire and the results that were collected, I want, first of all, to discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires.

#### **The questionnaire as a tool for psycho-social research**

The questionnaire is one of the most widely used methods of social scientific data collection. Indeed, it could be argued that social scientists are somewhat over-reliant on questionnaire-based research. In the context of this research, I would suggest that using a questionnaire alone would be of limited value in constructing an understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people. However, as a complement to the methods that have already operationalised during the course of this research, the questionnaire amounts to an invaluable addition to the research process, in as much as it,

“...seeks an understanding of what causes some phenomenon by looking at variation in that variable across cases, and looking for other characteristics which are systematically linked with it. As such it aims to draw causal inferences by a careful comparison of the various characteristics of cases.” (deVaus, 1996, p.5)

The main benefit of the questionnaire to this research therefore lies in its ability to collect substantial amounts of data which, in turn, can be easily compared, organised, and analysed. This particular questionnaire allowed for the collection of quantifiable data, which could be used to consider, in more detail, the qualitative trends that had been identified in the two previous phases of the research.

In this respect, Robson (1993) provides a useful summary of the attributes of the questionnaire. Questionnaires are relatively straightforward to administer and as such provide a relatively simple means of tapping attitudes, values, and beliefs. They can also be easily adapted in order to collect generalisable information (Robson, 1993). Indeed, as Singleton et al. (1993) note,

“Among all approaches to social research, in fact, surveys offer the most effective means of social description; they can provide extraordinarily detailed and precise information about large heterogeneous populations.”  
(p. 252)

The data questionnaires provide can be highly standardised, even, in the case of, this research, in the reporting of open-ended questions. As Robson (1993) goes on to point out, a major advantage of the survey method is the fact that it is extremely efficient at providing relatively large amounts of data, at little cost and over a very short period of time. In addition, surveys allow anonymity on the part of the respondent, thereby encouraging frank answers. Also, as Munn and Drever (1990) point out, all respondents are presented with the same questions, and, as such, minimal interviewer bias comes between the respondent and the question.

Questionnaires do, however, have their limitations. Robson (1993) again provides a good starting point. He argues that respondents will not necessarily report their actual beliefs, preferring instead to answer in ways which show them in a favourable social light. In effect, there is a danger of social reactivity. This tendency could well be amplified in a situation where large numbers of young people fill in survey questionnaires simultaneously. They may also be influenced by the answers given by their friends and peers. Robson also suggests that a further disadvantage of a questionnaire strategy is the fact that data are affected by the characteristics of the respondents, that is, by their memory, experience, and personality (p. 128).

There is also an argument for suggesting that the data collected from a questionnaire tends to be descriptive rather than explanatory (Munn and Drever, 1990). Indeed, deVaus (1996) notes the suggestion that surveys are actually incapable of getting at the meaningful aspects of social action. Though, as I will argue shortly, I tend to agree with deVaus who argues that this is not actually always the case. What is true is that surveys tend to take the meaning of behaviour out of context, in that the social action they attempt to address is isolated from the actual completion of the survey. DeVaus (1996) also points out, that questionnaires tend to be synonymous with approaches that see human action as constructed by external forces, and by implication become equated with a sterile, ritualistic and rigid model of science. On the other hand, it could equally be argued that questionnaires are inherently atomistic, in that they depend on the psychological reactions of individuals; off which social meanings are read. However, this point of view underestimates the ways in which structural constraints on behaviour are expressed and interpreted by individual respondents (deVaus, 1996). From a technique-based point of view there is the further argument that surveys are too restrictive and overly dependant upon statistics.

But perhaps the most compelling criticism concerning questionnaires relates to the arguably superficial nature of their findings; this point being further discussed by Munn and Drever (1990). The swift completion of a questionnaire is counter-balanced by the fact that there is usually no interviewer, at least certainly not at a one-to-one level, to interpret or explain the meaning of questions (though this, it should be noted, is not the case in this research). As a result, especially when open-ended questions are incorporated, there are likely to be large gaps in the data set. When that data set is analysed the nature of the questionnaire survey is such, as Singleton et al. (1993) point out, that it is difficult to make causal references. This again, refers back to the point about the provision of description as opposed to explanation. The standardised nature of the questionnaire is potentially restrictive. I will now discuss the data collected from my Consumer Meanings Questionnaire, at which point I will reconsider such arguments.

## **Design**

### **Pilot questionnaire design and refinements**

The Consumer Meanings Questionnaire was piloted with the same students that participated in my pilot focus group interviews (see Appendix 10). A total of, thirty Behavioural Sciences students therefore completed the questionnaire. The intention was to address consumer meanings in as direct a fashion as possible. The content of the questionnaire was decided upon after considering the results gleaned from the previous two stages of my research. I therefore tried to incorporate the sorts of issue raised by my respondents in both the focus group interview situation and during the participant observation.

The decision was made to focus on specific goods that young people had purchased, and more particularly specific goods that had given young people *pleasure*. By focusing on these goods the intention was to give large numbers of



young people a direct opportunity, more so than had been possible during the previous two phases of the research, to express what constituted the meanings with which they invested consumer goods. The fact that they were specifically requested to refer to items that had given them particular pleasure was intended to ensure that the goods concerned had some significance to them. The intention was to find out what that significance was. The more specific nature of the questionnaire will be discussed in more detail when I consider the final version below.

The actual questionnaires took my respondents approximately ten minutes to complete. I felt that this was appropriate, in as much as this allowed the questionnaire to retain the interest of my respondents. I asked the students completing my pilot questionnaire to comment about how easy it was to complete. They were also asked to offer any other comments. These comments were taken into account in the re-drafting of the final questionnaire. After considering the returned questionnaires it was subsequently decided that significant improvements needed to be made before the questionnaire as a whole actually addressed the sorts of questions that this research intended to address. These were incorporated in the final version of the questionnaire.

After piloting the original version of the questionnaire it was felt that the questions concerned were somewhat leading and as such were subsequently refined. The problem with the pilot questionnaire was not only that it was directive, for instance in its reference to 'good value', and 'expensive well-renowned make', but that at least two of the questions were slightly ambiguous (see Appendix 10). For instance, I asked 'Did you take a long time to decide to purchase this item?' It was not clear whether this referred to the period during which a respondent imagined the purchase prior to actually entering the shop concerned, or the period spent physically considering that item in the shop. I

decided, ultimately, that this question was unnecessary. In addition, the pilot questionnaire asked the following, 'How, if at all, do you see this item contributing to your identity?' The responses to this question clearly illustrated that the concept of identity (as was illustrated in Chapter 3) can be construed in different ways. The pilot questionnaires were completed by my respondents individually and were collected immediately. There was no intention to analyse the results gained from my pilot questionnaires. Rather, I used the information to construct a final version of my pilot questionnaire, which, to summarise, was intended to be a vehicle which tapped the meanings which young people endowed in their consumer goods.

### **Final questionnaire design**

#### **i) Sampling strategy**

My priority was to collect responses from large numbers of respondents, gaining the maximum number of responses as possible in order to establish, if possible, a degree of generalisability. The best means of achieving this aim, it was decided, was by targeting educational establishments in which I might hope to gain access to large numbers of respondents of the appropriate age, in one place, at one time.

#### **ii) Sample details**

My Consumer Meanings Questionnaires were completed in four educational establishments in the Huddersfield area. I approached, by letter, a total of seven educational establishments with the request that large numbers of students might complete the questionnaire in my presence. Of the total of four college representatives I approached from an original list of seven institutions, three indicated that students did not congregate in sufficient numbers for my purposes. However, one college representative did agree to my request (38 students). The other three institutions who agreed to me conducting my research

were school six forms, including one girls school. A sub-total of 77, 82, and 98 students completed the questionnaire in each of these three institutions.

Due to the relatively large numbers involved I had limited control over the gender balance of my sample. In the event, the questionnaire was filled in by a total of 285 respondents, 169 females and 116 males. This discrepancy was not considered significant enough to undermine the intentions of the research and allowed for some comparison between male and females. All my respondents were aged between 15 and 18 and were studying for their GCSE 'A' levels. The fact that in order to obtain large numbers of completed questionnaires this third phase of my research was based in schools, meant that I was unable to incorporate a sampling strategy that included both academic and vocational students, as had been possible during my focus group interviews.

### **iii) Questionnaire Design**

The Consumer Meanings Questionnaire was constructed as a means by which it might be possible to address, in a more focused manner, the meanings with which young consumers endowed specific consumer goods. I enclose copies of five completed and representative questionnaires in Appendix 11. I made the conscious decision to get my respondents to think about the meanings they had for an item they had recently bought that had given them particular pleasure. I therefore emphasised how important it was for the students concerned to provide their own individual responses to the questionnaire. In order that this item was fixed in each individuals mind I also asked them to record on the sheet provided what that item was, the shop they purchased it from, the cost of the item, and whether it was a planned or an impulse buy. This information also helped me to address further dimensions of the shopping experience which I will discuss below.

As I mentioned whilst discussing my pilot questionnaire, the next stage of the inventory incorporated what I identified as the major themes that had emerged in the previous stages of my data collection. As such, categories were not imposed upon my respondents, but reflected material that had emerged in the previous two stages of the research; thereby contributing to the triangulated nature of the overall research project. My respondents were asked to rate which of these factors influenced their decision to purchase the said item. Space was also provided for further factors identified by my respondents as influencing their decision.

Perhaps the major theme to emerge from my data collection during the previous two stages of the research was the significance of peer pressure. As such, I went on to ask my respondents whether or not their friends owned a similar item and they were then given space to describe how, if at all, this influenced their purchasing decision. The questionnaire also asked what it was about the item that gave my respondents pleasure. The questionnaire's final question encapsulated a major issue which pervades this research as a whole, in terms of the relationship between consumption and identity. As such, my respondents were asked to comment as to what this particular purchase said about them as a person.

#### **iv) Procedure**

The questionnaires were filled in by my respondents, congregated in the group sizes indicated above. I decided that it was absolutely paramount that I should be in attendance whilst my respondents completed the task. As such, I was able to clarify any questions that my respondents might have had regarding the content of the questionnaire. It was felt that though the questionnaire was reasonably self-explanatory, due to its atypical and relatively abstract nature, I should be available to answer any potential queries. It was also important that I was

available to briefly outline the intention of the questionnaire. This would not have been possible if I had distributed the questionnaires by post. As in the case of my pilot questionnaire, my final questionnaires were collected immediately on completion. This helped to maximise returns, which were anonymous, though it should be noted that on one occasion the teacher present insisted that students wrote their names on their questionnaires. These were subsequently erased from the actual questionnaires.

The instructions which I gave to my respondents at each of the four venues, prior to them completing the questionnaire, were carefully prepared and carefully transmitted to my respondents:

*Thank you everybody for agreeing to complete this questionnaire. My name is Steve Miles and I work at the University where I am conducting some research into the role that the goods young people buy have for how they see themselves; for how they construct their identities. The questionnaire is very short and should not take more than five to ten minutes to complete. It is also very important that you fill in your own questionnaire. Please do not consult your neighbours efforts. If you have any queries whatsoever, please do not hesitate to ask me for help. Thank you for your help. All responses will be treated, confidentially.*

## **Results**

### **a) The distribution of items chosen**

The range of products purchased were categorised under eleven headings: *clothes*; *music* (which included CDs tapes and records); and *trainers*; which were distinguished from other *footwear*, *books*; *games* and *ornaments*. Less self-evident categories were *activities* which included the purchase of items connected with a variety of pursuits from rock climbing to skateboarding, *hi-tech* which included the purchase of items such as hi-fis and personal stereos; *entertainment* which

included tickets to pop concerts and similar events. Finally a category of *risk* was included which covered the purchase of illegal substances.

The distribution of these categories is shown in figure 3. Clothes represent the largest single category, followed by: trainers, other footwear and music, with the remaining categories representing only small numbers of responses. Clearly items of wear are the most likely to come to the minds of these young people when asked to identify purchases which bring them pleasure. The clothing, trainer and footwear categories combined account for 78% of items overall.

**Figure 3: *The distribution of products***

<b>PRODUCT CATEGORY</b>	<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
<b>Clothes</b>	154	55. 58
<b>Music</b>	36	12. 68
<b>Footwear</b>	27	9. 51
<b>Trainers</b>	21	7. 39
<b>Activities</b>	12	4. 23
<b>Games</b>	9	3. 1
<b>Books</b>	9	3. 1
<b>Hi-tech</b>	6	2. 11
<b>Entertainment</b>	5	1. 76
<b>Ornaments</b>	2	0. 7
<b>Risk</b>	2	0. 7
<b>TOTAL</b>	285	100

The preponderance of clothing might well, in itself, imply that visual forms of consumption are very important to young people. The above figures do, in fact,

emphasise the role of consumption as a source of display and negotiation. My respondents rarely identified more personal forms of consumption as particularly pleasurable; thus the popularity of music, footwear, and trainers, all items which can be influenced by young people's peers, in contrast to books, games, and musical equipment, which do not tend to be influenced as much by such factors.

In terms of the overall pattern of purchases, responses for males and females were broadly similar, though some gender differences were found. Young women were more likely to pick footwear and clothes as their items whilst the young men were more likely to choose the trainers, games, and action categories.

#### **b) Shops where items were purchased**

The vast majority of the products (82%) were purchased in chain stores. In fact, only 25 out of the 155 respondents that brought clothes, did so from a non-chain store. The only anomaly in this regard were sporting or action goods (excluding training shoes) which accounted for 6 local shoppers and 6 national chain shoppers. No training shoes, which were designated by 21 respondents, were, however, purchased from local non-chain stores. This point raises two issues; firstly, the fact that British shopping centres are clearly dominated by nationwide chain-stores which appear to satisfy young consumers needs, despite the limitations they may impose upon consumer choice. Young consumers, though aware of the limitations of their shopping environment, as was argued in Chapter 7, appear to be reasonably happy with the consumer goods offered in such an environment. This leads on to the second point which is that there does not appear to be a perceived need on the part of young people to subvert the status quo. Young people seem to be reasonably happy with the shopping opportunities that such outlets provide and do not feel the necessity to hunt out alternative options. In effect, however much they may suggest otherwise, the fact

that chain stores throughout Great Britain stock the same goods, means that consumption patterns are inevitably replicated. In this sense, an individual cannot be 'unique' as such; he or she is subject to the provision of shopping amenities, which appear, in this sense, to satisfy consumer desires.

### c) Price

On the whole the items designated by my respondents were of fairly modest price as can be seen in figure 4.

**Figure 4: *The price of items purchased***

Price band	Number	Percentage
1 (0 - £4. 99)	21	7. 42
2 (£5 - 19. 99)	112	39. 58
3 (£20 - 49. 99)	96	33. 92
4 (£50 and above)	54	19. 08
<b>TOTAL</b>	285	100

This reinforces the view from previous stages of the research that this age group takes consumption seriously but has only slender resources available with which to sustain it. It is not surprising therefore that the majority of purchases, 64.8%, should have been planned in advance. The evidence here is that these young people are rational shoppers. Chi square calculations revealed a significant relationship between items and price, with clothing, footwear and trainers being the most expensive items  $p=.0001$ . These items were also the most likely to involve a planned purchase  $p=.0417$ ; whilst the price of items itself was strongly related to the planning of the purchase  $p=.0293$ .



#### **d) Factors influencing the purchases**

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to ten the importance of a number of factors in their decision which previous stages of this research had indicated might be of importance. The results were subject to a one way analysis of variance. The results are shown in figure 5.

**Figure 5: *The rating of importance of factors in the purchasing decision***

<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>MEAN</b>	<b>STD DEVIATION</b>
<b>Value for money</b>	7.02	2.8
<b>How fashionable</b>	6.7	2.86
<b>Reputation of brand</b>	6.7	2.79
<b>Confidence</b>	6.19	3.07
<b>Expresses individuality</b>	6.16	3.07
<b>Opinion of friends</b>	5.99	2.91
<b>'Street-cred' of name</b>	5.38	3.11
<b>Image of shop</b>	5.17	2.81
<b>Advertising</b>	4.01	2.81

<b>Between subject F-test score</b>	4.49	df: 277	p= .0001
<b>Within subject F-test score</b>	42.95	df: 2224	P= .0001

Post hoc analysis was carried out on this table using the Scheffe f-test. It showed that the factors split into three distinct groups. The first six factors are very

similar in importance followed by 'street cred' and the image of the shop. Young people are clearly concerned with practical utility-related factors, and value for money is particularly significant in this regard. Any consideration of the role of consumption in young people's lives needs to acknowledge that fact. Almost as significant to young people is the extent to which a particular good is fashionable. And yet ironically, though the fashionability of a good is at least partly influenced by advertising and media-exposure generally, my respondents indicated, in general, that this had very little influence on their purchasing decision. As I pointed out in my previous empirical chapters and as I will continue to argue, this tends to suggest that young people are convinced of their own agency in the context of consumption, though paradoxically not that of their peers. The fact that young people feel such a sense of agency through their consumption habits may, indeed, imply that the ideological influence of the media, which actively encourages consumers to 'be themselves', is more powerful than they imagine.

The limited importance that young people assign to the image of the shop from which they purchased their pleasurable items is of considerable interest, particularly when related to evidence collected during my participant observation. Certainly, it is fair to say in the case of training shoes that the image of the shop concerned is not especially important, however much the owners of the particular stores might like to think so. The majority of the most popular models of training shoes are replicated from one store to another, and thus it is the stock kept by the shop rather than the image of the shop itself that appears to be important to consumers. Having said that, it is perhaps surprising that the image of the shop is not so important in the case of clothes, the most popular category of consumer good purchased by my respondents. It might have been anticipated that the overall package, or image presented to consumers by clothes stores such as Gap, Top Man, and Top Shop would either attract or distract

potential customers. But the fact that such a diversity of clothes shops were visited by my respondents would suggest that young people are, in this respect, discerning consumers, whose taste in clothes are, on balance, more style-led than shop-led. Advertising was rated as the least significant factor influencing my respondents' purchasing decisions, illustrating the fact that young people *feel* that they enforce their own personal freedom of choice regardless of the sanctions imposed by consumer capitalism.

As a whole, figure 5 reveals some of the essential paradoxes which this study is attempting to unravel. These young people want value for money which they associate with reputable brands. However, they also want items that are fashionable, which give them confidence and which express their individuality. On the other hand the 'street cred' of named brands, the image attached to particular shops, the role of advertising, and the opinions of friends, are all seen as relatively unimportant. Yet in answer to a separate question which asked if friends also owned the product purchased, 71.3% said that they did. The contradictory demands of both being an individual making ones own decisions, and being confident that one is perceived as fashionable by wearing the 'right' clothes and listening to the right music, are highlighted here. And yet, as the following responses to the question that specifically addressed this issue, later in the questionnaire, illustrate, my respondents were often indignant about their friends having no influence on the purchase of their particular pleasurable item,

"This did not influence my purchase at all. My friends own similar items, but my friends do not influence the music that I buy as I only buy music if I like it, not if my friends buy it."

"Mainly if I saw someone who had something similar, and I liked them. But I do think it a good quality if you have the courage to be an individual."

"Only in that I liked the designs - no peer pressure involved!"

"No, this did not. I like to have my own image and be recognised for it."

"It shows I have confidence in what I want." [I underlined 3 times]

"This says that I love fashion and I like buying clothes. It says that I like to be different and not have the same clothes as everybody else."

The mere suggestion that any such peer influence should be involved was often taken to be a slight on my respondents characters. Many were at pains to express how important their individuality was to them, despite often recognising the parallel significance of fashion, as in the final example above. However, many further respondents (38%) did acknowledge the influence of their peers on what it was they consumed. The key issue here seemed to be acceptance on the part of peers,

"If your friends own it or something similar it makes you feel that you are fashionable and that you will be accepted more easily." [respondent's emphasis]

Returning to the earlier section of the questionnaire when respondents were asked to make a note of, and rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, any other factors which they saw as important in influencing the decision to purchase their pleasurable item, thirty nine respondents included some kind of *utility* rating which clearly fits in with my respondents concerns about value for money. Interestingly, 24 respondents included *taste* which was differentiated from fashion and 'street cred'. 18 respondents saw the *admiration* of others as important, whilst 8 included some kind of *group identity* factor. Finally 3 people included a *fitness* factor in relation to activity-based purchases. The low numbers involved in these categories precluded any statistical analysis, although it is suggestive that group identity was included mainly by male respondents, in that as many as seven of the eight respondents who identified group respondents as an additional factor, were male. This might be seen to reflect Smith's (1987) contention that young people's leisure patterns are divided along gender lines, in as much as young

men are drawn more towards team games during the teenage years, whilst young women are more interested in more individualistic pursuits. As far as this research is concerned, it could be intimated that whilst a group identity (as focused, for instance, on a football team) is important to young men, what is of more concern to young women is the personal confidence which they derive from consumer goods. In effect, young women appear to gain confidence from consumer goods more directly than their male counterparts.

#### **e) Factors influencing the purchase of specific products**

A repeated measures one factor analysis of variance was carried out to investigate the relationship between the product categories and the rating scales. Although this test might be more appropriately used in circumstances where all respondents were rating the same items, it was considered sufficiently robust to use in this context. The figures for ornaments and risk were excluded on the grounds that they constituted small groups which could potentially distort the calculation. The results are given in figure 6.

This table reveals some interesting rating variations in factors of importance across product categories. Whilst value for money was rated highly for all categories it was highest for hi tech goods and games. This seems to imply that though value for money is important, it is considered more important when purchasing expensive personal items, than for the purchase of those goods normally considered to be 'fashionable'. As such, value for money does not seem to have the same salience for decisions involving trainers and music. Indeed, the factors which are most important in the decision to purchase trainers are fashion, brand reputation and 'street cred'. Whilst 'street cred' is not rated as very important overall, its significance in relation to trainers, and to a lesser extent other footwear, is clear. As would be expected, the second most important overall factor, fashion, is most important for clothes, trainers and footwear. The

**Figure 6: One Factor Repeat Measures Analysis of Variance of the relationship between product categories and the ratings of importance of factors in the decision (numbers and means)**

Items (nos)	Value	Fashion	Brand	Confidence	Individuality	Friends	'Street cred'	Image of shop	Advertising
Trainers (21)	6.67	8.91	7.8	6.67	5.62	6.71	7.24	5.71	5.33
Footwear(27)	7.67	8.26	7.37	7.41	6.78	5.74	6	5.48	3.44
Clothes(154)	7.14	7.39	6.78	6.85	6.67	6.56	5.68	5.85	3.89
Music (34)	5.62	3.79	5.29	2.97	4.75	4.29	3.47	3.47	4.06
Books (8)	6.75	3.5	6.38	3.38	4.38	3.62	4	3	3.38
Games (8)	8	6.88	7.5	4.5	5.62	6.62	5.62	5.12	5.38
Hi-tech (6)	9	6.67	7.5	4.5	5.33	6.83	4.17	5.83	3.5
Activities (12)	7.58	4.83	6.67	7.75	6.08	5.25	5	2.33	3.75
Entertainment (5)	7	2.6	5	3.8	3.8	5	2.8	4.2	4
Totals (275)	7	6.74	6.73	6.17	6.16	6.01	5.39	5.22	3.99

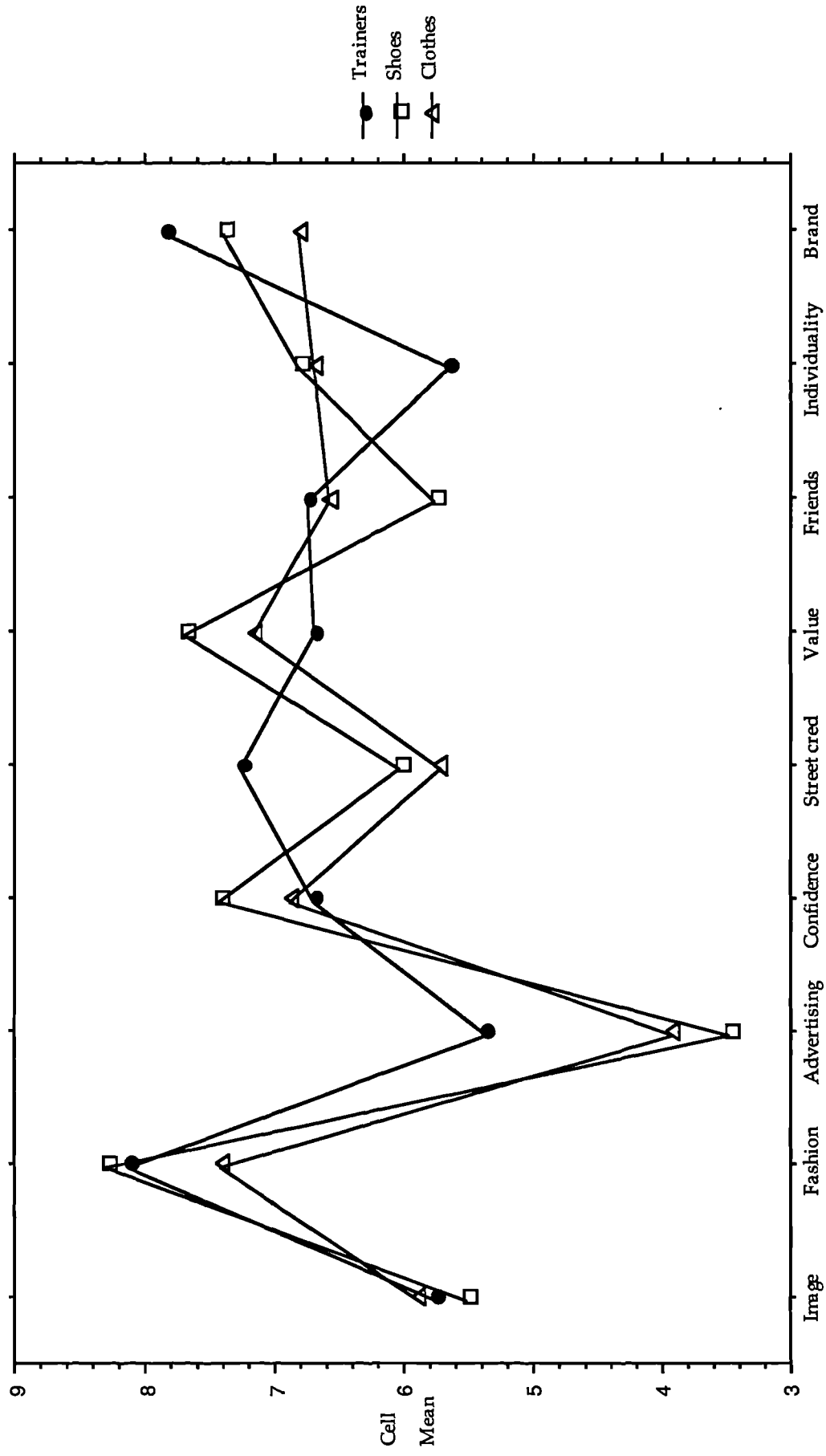
Repeated measure F-test =45.26      FD:8      p= .0001

importance of the reputation of branded goods is highest in relation to trainers, footwear, games, and hi tech equipment. Clearly these are the areas where product reputation and perception of reliability and durability are of greatest concern. The self-confidence that buying a particular product brings is again particularly related to trainers, footwear and clothes, except that here it seems that involvement in the activities related to the action category is also perceived to enhance confidence. Despite the significance of group influences on young people's consumption habits, the expression of individuality is considered to be more important by my respondents in the case of footwear, clothes, and activities, whilst the opinion of friends is most important for trainers, clothes, games, and hi-tech items. As has already been illustrated, 'street cred' is an important element in deciding what trainers to buy, but not for other items. The image of the shop and advertising were rated as insubstantial factors across all product categories. In addition, T-tests of the scores of ratings of factors of importance revealed that young women were more likely to rate advertising as important in relation to trainers ( $p=.0227$ ) and were also more likely to rate value for money as being more important in relation to clothes ( $p=.0253$ ).

Figure 6 reinforces the suggestion made earlier, that young people are relatively, discerning consumers who balance such discernment with a need for communal acceptance which they express, largely, through fashion. Young people, in effect, claim to be immune to the ideological influences of consumerism, as expressed through the image of shops and the impact of advertising, and yet appear to engender considerable amounts of personal investment in the fashion experience.

The special status of the purchase decision in relation to trainers is illustrated in the interaction plot shown in figure 7. This has been restricted to trainers, footwear and clothes which, as has been shown, constituted 82% of the items chosen. The plot shows that footwear and clothes follow a very similar line,

**Figure 7: Interaction line plot showing the levels of importance for trainers, footwear, and clothes**





whilst trainers deviate slightly from this. Fashion is important across the three items but, whilst advertising, 'street cred', and the opinion of friends are of relatively low importance for clothes and footwear, they are significantly more so for trainers. This might be said to suggest that trainers engender specific types of meanings for young people. I would argue that what a study of trainers in fact does (as expressed most forcibly during the reported findings of my participant observation) is amplify some of the meaning trends which are endowed by young people in consumer goods, in general. Value for money is also of lower importance as far as trainers are concerned, whilst the importance of the brand name is relatively high. Above all other items the pleasure of purchasing trainers seems to lie in buying the right brand with the right street cred. In this context, I would suggest that trainers amplify the symbolic role that consumer goods play in general as resources in the construction of youth identities.

#### **f) Implications for identity construction**

The intention of the final three questions in the questionnaire, and in particular of the latter two, was to attempt to come to terms with what role young consumers felt consumer goods had in constructing their identities. As such, the wording of such questions were considered very carefully in order to provide respondents with as open an opportunity as possible, to express their own personal meanings. Despite the abstract nature of such questions the vast majority of respondents managed to provide an answer. Indeed, as few as 50 of the 385 respondents either left the box that asked what the item said about them as a person completely blank, or said that the item concerned had no relevance to who they were as a person. Only 17 specifically said that the item concerned said nothing about them. Indeed, only one person actually questioned the fact that purchasing an item could say anything about a person,

“Nothing whatsoever. (This is a strange question to ask, as I don’t think anyone really cares that much what they buy)” [respondents emphasis]

In order to simplify the process of data analysis responses to the final two questions were grouped into the following categories and coded according to whether or not the influence of that factor was either acknowledged as being appropriate, or alternatively, dismissed: *fashion*; acceptance amongst the *peer group*; *influence*; *confidence*; *expense* of item; *personal taste*; *utility factors*; *quality* of the product; and finally the significance of a *designer* label. The most coded category in this context was influence; that is the recognition on the part of the consumer that he or she was influenced by the consumption habits of peers, or on the contrary, the dismissal of such an influence. 210 of 285 respondents discussed, however briefly, the role of peer influence in their lives. This might, of course, be taken to reflect the fact that young people were seeking to counter-balance the perceived tone of the questionnaire as a whole, regarding any perceived emphasis on peer influence. However, it is interesting to note that despite the possible (though arguably relatively minor) stigma involved in acknowledging that personal taste was influenced by peer tastes, a total of 80 respondents acknowledged as much; 130 explicitly denying such an influence. This reasserts the argument that peer influence has a major impact upon young peoples lives, and that young people actively endeavour to deny it’s role. After all, to claim that your identity is in any way unstable is in itself threatening to an individual’s sense of identity. Such instability is put into focus for an individual if he or she explicitly acknowledges the fact that consumer goods play a strong stabilising role in their lives. Some of the responses provided by my respondents are worth quoting here,

“I do care about what I look like to other people but not to such an extent that I would purposely copy a friend or a famous person.”

“I want to be accepted and fit in!”

"I like to feel smart in casual clothes such as these, for although it is different in design it is plain in colour, for me to feel confident I need to feel comfortable with my looks."

"I'd rather not look like everyone else, as my friends opinions were important, I still need reassurance that I don't look like a prat!!!"

"I hope that the item shows I am normal, and likeable."

The last of the above quotations is particularly enlightening in reflecting an overall theme that ran throughout responses to the latter stage of the questionnaire and to this research as a whole. This data appears to illustrate that often, consumption is an essentially stabilising experience for young people. I would suggest, in fact, that it is far too risky for young people to actually take any risks with their consumption habits, when such habits fulfil the role of an oasis of stability in an unstable world.

## **Discussion**

Before I go on to discuss the implications of the above findings, I should relate the issues concerning the general advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires to the actual use of my own Consumer Meanings Questionnaire.

By adjusting the questionnaire format to my own ends I was able to construct a useful means of addressing consumer meanings from which I could collect generalisable data. It should be noted, however, that some problems were caused by large numbers of respondents filling in my questionnaires simultaneously. Given the time constraints involved it was not possible for me to collect 285 individually completed questionnaires. Consequently, there can be no doubt that as a result of collecting this amount of data in large group situations, many of my respondents would have referred to their neighbour's efforts, in order to complete the task provided. This in turn, inevitably reflects, to some extent, on the results which I presented above. However, considering the social and cultural

nature of the phenomena being researched here, namely young people's consumption habits, I would suggest that it is not necessarily unfortunate for the actual measurement of such habits to retain some form of group dimension; in that as I have already established consumption is, in itself, a very group-oriented experience. It is appropriate that methodologies being used to address consumer meanings reflect that fact. Robson's (1993) comment about the characteristics and experiences of respondents potentially affecting data, is also relevant (p. 250). However, in the context of this research it can be argued that this is, in fact, a positive advantage, in that, by tapping such experiences it might be possible to develop some of the insights, concerning the nature of consumer meanings, that began to emerge in the first two phases of the research.

As I noted earlier, a further problem associated with the completion of questionnaires, particularly in relation to open-ended questions and their interpretation, was dealt with by my being on hand whilst the questionnaires were completed. However, generally, I found the enthusiasm with which young people appeared to answer questions about the goods they had consumed, meant that there were very few problems in this regard. As such, the actual analysis of questionnaire responses was not as difficult as might have been anticipated.

However, the main point I want to make at this stage is that the limitations characteristic of questionnaire research which I discuss above, concerning for instance, the suggestion that the data collected is descriptive rather than explanatory, are generally overcome by using this particular research tool in conjunction with other suitable means of addressing consumer meanings. In particular, the problems inherent in having either an overly-structural or atomistic model of human behaviour should be overcome by contextualising

young people in their cultural worlds, as I have tried to do during the course of this thesis.

Having considered how the limitations of questionnaire research reflect on my own Consumer Meanings Questionnaire, I should consider more specifically the question of addressing meaning in this sort of research format. What implications does the above discussion have for using questionnaires as a means of tapping the construction of meaning in social contexts? This is an issue discussed in some detail by deVaus (1996). The first problem is how to effectively interpret the nature of the meanings which people construct. It is undoubtedly very difficult to come to terms with the meanings particular behaviours and attitudes have for particular people. DeVaus (1996) in fact, calls for survey researchers to supplement their questionnaire studies with more in-depth data collection techniques. That is exactly the intention of this research.

I discussed the question of researching into people's own meanings, and more particularly consumer meanings, in some depth in Chapter 6; the key question here being whether actions, apparently unknown to the actor can be made understandable to the researcher through the statistical analysis of survey data. This issue is discussed in some detail by Marsh (1992) who concludes that though actors have privileged access to their own experience, they do not always have access to the determinants of their own behaviour (p. 106). As such, rather than accepting Henry's (1971) contention that actors themselves are simply an unreliable source of data, I accept Marsh's (1992) subsequent suggestion, that in fact, actors do have important insights into the social processes in which they are involved (p. 107). What is necessitated by implication then, is the careful construction of questions to address meanings, and the careful interpretation of the results. Marsh (1992) admits that traditionally surveys have been poor at making sense of social action and meaning in a valid manner (p. 101). But by

either asking for the respondent's reasons directly, or by collecting a sufficiently complete picture of the context in which a respondent finds him or herself (from which the researcher can read off meaningful dimensions; checking carefully that this is done in a consistent manner), questionnaires *can* be used to address human meanings. Their particular benefit, in the context of this research, is their generalisability, something that was not in evidence, as such, through the findings of the first two phases of this research. The qualitative findings of the first two stages were enhanced by a larger, statistically analysed, sample with which aspects of my ongoing research question could be developed and focused in an easily handled questionnaire format. The main point to recognise, at this stage then, is that,

"Since the process of determination in the social world are subjective in important ways, involving actors, meanings and intentions, the survey researcher has to face the task of measuring these subjective aspects."  
(Marsh 1982, p. 147)

The above was a major intention of my Consumer Meanings Questionnaire. By building upon the evidence collected during both my focus group interviews and my participant observation, the questionnaire provided a potentially useful means of helping to demystify some of the intricacies of the relationship between determination and subjectivity, in the context of the relationship between consumption and identity. In turn, it provided some generalisable indications as to what might actually constitute this relationship. One of the tasks of this research is to balance the subjective with the structural and, thereby, to decide if there is, indeed, any room for generalisability in this context.

The only means of addressing the problem of establishing meanings is to provide as much freedom as possible for respondents to discuss the meanings they have

for the consumer goods concerned, within the framework of the questionnaire, in order that as much detail as possible might be gleaned about the significance of such meanings. A Consumer Meanings Questionnaire cannot provide all the answers about the relationship between consumption and identity. All it can do is provide a platform with which meanings endowed in consumer goods can be addressed; a framework by which an assessment of the relationship between consumption and identity can begin to be made.

The actual quantitative data collected by means of my Consumer Meanings Questionnaire can be said to have reinforced many of the paradoxes evident in the more qualitative aspects of this research. Youth consumption is clearly subject to all sorts of tensions and pressures, associated not merely with the construction of self-identity in a personal sense, but according to interactional aspects of day-to-day life, thereby reinforcing the argument underlying this thesis; that is, the idea that consumption provides an invaluable focus, or framework, for stabilising young people's everyday lives (which in many aspects are essentially unstable). As such, it is not the goods themselves that structure young people's identities, but the social meanings endowed in such goods. Consumption provides the day-to-day framework by which young people construct who it is they are amongst their peers, but as a fundamental influence on self-conception it appears to have an indirect role. Conversely, it must also be said that all the indications are that young people are at pains to play down the role that consumption plays in their life, almost as if that role is perceived on their part to be a nugatory and therefore unfulfilling one.

One interesting point which emerged during the completion of the questionnaires was that the respondents concerned had very little difficulty in identifying what they saw as appropriate consumer goods. Despite its unfamiliar nature the Consumer Meanings Questionnaire was usually completed, often

thoroughly, within a time-span of ten minutes. The impact of consumerism, and its role in everyday life appears to be well-ingrained, so much so that this sort of exercise appears to be completed almost as if it was second nature. Indeed, only one solitary respondent actually pointed out that he could not think of an item that he had recently purchased that had given him pleasure. It could be argued, therefore, that consumerism is a social norm, indeed, an ideology, from which, as I suggested in Chapter 5, it is difficult, arguably impossible, to remain immune.

The need, or denial of the need for acceptability is closely related to the question of confidence. In an increasingly individualistic consumer-orientated society young people are likely to become increasingly anxious about who it is they are. If, in a so-called postmodern society, family networks become increasingly dissipated, local communities offer an increasing alien environment, and the prospects of being trained for life in a workless society become increasingly real, then young people are drawn, more and more, to peers with common interests (see Hollands, 1995). They are drawn, not to consumer goods as a focus for identity formation, in the first instance, but rather to their peers who use such goods as a means of communicating solidarity through commonalities. In the latter section of the questionnaire 53 respondents, that is 18.6% of respondents, many of which would say directly that a particular item, "gives me confidence", identified confidence as being an important factor in the ways in which they perceived consumer goods as affecting their lives. In effect, consumer goods, and most evidently clothes, allow young people to *feel* that they can express who it is they are as individuals.

The implication here is that the majority of young people, despite their reservations about the negative connotations that consumer goods can have, do feel that consumer goods have an important role to play in their lives whether or not such a role is utility-driven or symbolically-driven. For instance, many



respondents illustrated that they put some not inconsiderable thought into what item they referred to during the inventory, and indeed, to which item they were purchasing. The pressures on young people to consume in certain ways was well illustrated by one respondent in particular,

“Maybe a book wasn’t a good choice because it’s not an ‘external’ purchase, however, it could say I enjoy thinking a lot about things.”

It is certainly true to say that the majority of respondents chose what this person described as ‘external’ purchases; purchases which engender an element of self-expression in social contexts. This is not because the Consumer Meanings Questionnaire encouraged them to do so in any way; indeed it gave respondents a free rein to talk about any pleasurable consumer good that they chose to identify, but rather, I would suggest, because such ‘external’ goods have a more prominent role in people’s everyday lives. The structural impact of consumerism is such that ‘internal’ purchases do not carry the same weight, or cultural capital, in everyday life, as they have done in the past. Instead, consumers appear to consume ‘external’ purchases which they believe to have ‘internal’ implications, but which arguably appear to merely paper over the ‘internal cracks’, as it were. That is, consumer goods serve the purpose of providing partial fulfilment in a life where complete fulfilment becomes an increasingly abstract goal. The foundations for such fulfilment are often constituted in the form of an overall consumer lifestyle in which various styles and consumer goods are juxtaposed to form a stabilised consuming self. In her answer to the final part of the questionnaire, for example, one respondent replied that,

“I hope that it says that I’m quite fashionable! Other than that the item is basically the sort of fashion I go for, I like indie music and hate dance music, so I hope this kind of shows in the clothes I wear.”

In this sense, designer labels can be picked out as often playing a particularly expressive role in constructing an overall image, the perceived *rarity* of a consumer good being especially important. For instance, several of my respondents (from different colleges) identified Versace suits as a consumer good which gave them particular pleasure. The question as to whether or not young people could actually afford to buy a suit costing hundreds of pounds in the first place, and indeed whether their parents would sanction such a purchase, has to be asked. The possibility that these particular answers were fabricated cannot be dismissed. But even if such purchases were imaginary, the mere mention of such designer labels in this context is a powerful expression of the significance of consumer symbolism to young people's everyday lives. Ironically, young people appear to be convinced that by buying into, or at least by being perceived to be buying into, a culture where expensive designer brands offer increased status, they in turn, can achieve added individuality in an 'accepted' way.

It is acceptability and confidence then, that provides the key to an understanding of the role of consumption in young peoples lives in contemporary society. Fashion, and consumer goods more generally, provide the resources by which such acceptability can be achieved. In particular, females are more likely to admit the need for using consumer goods as sources of confidence than their more self-conscious male counterparts. More generally, in being accepted by their peers, young people can establish personal confidence, which is, in fact, generated in a social-cultural context.

So what conclusions, if any, can be made at this stage about the role of consumption in constructing young people's identities? And does the Consumer Meanings Questionnaire, in tandem with the other techniques adopted during the course of this research, offer an adequate means of addressing such a question? These are questions that I will consider in detail in my concluding

chapter. What should be pointed out here is that I am not intending to argue that consumer goods have a 'controlling' role to play in constructing how young people feel about themselves. Rather, consumer goods appear to provide a viable resource by which constructive, and arguably creative, conceptions of themselves can be established in a risk society. The only problem seems to lie in the fact that ultimately such conceptions can never be truly creative, in that much of this creation is pre-ordained by producers, whose impact is denied by young people, but whose *actual* influence ensures that there is little needed, in the way of imagination, on the part of consumers. Consumption appears to make life in a risk society a less stressful experience for young people. But, in the end, as I will argue in Chapter 10, perhaps what is really important here is the fact that young people *feel* that they need consumer goods as a source of stability in their lives.

To conclude this chapter, it is fair to say, first of all, that the vision of the rational consumer that comes out of this research does not concur with the postmodern vision of the unpredictable consumer free to do as he or she pleases on the marketplace. Far from young people choosing their consumer goods on a whim, the mundane reality is that such a vision is tempered by the *rational* constraints of everyday life. Though it can be accepted that young people have reasonably diverse taste and that they do, to an extent, pick and choose the clothes that they wear, and, indeed, the shops in which they buy them, such choice is not free in any real sense, but is subject to well-established social and cultural parameters. It is not postmodern consumer freedom that is in evidence here, but consumer conformity; conformity which is necessitated by the psycho-social need for stability in everyday life. These issues will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.

## Chapter 10

### Concluding Discussion

In developing Chapters 1 to 6 of this thesis, it became clear that the inability to effectively conceptualise the meanings with which consumers endow consumer goods represents a fundamental limitation in the effective evolution of a sociology of consumption. I proposed, subsequently, that by addressing such meanings directly, it might be possible for the sociologist to begin to consider the significance of the relationship between consumption and identity. It was suggested that the personal investment that people have in what it is they consume may provide a suitable basis from which theoretical insights can be developed, in that identities are grounded, situated, phenomena which cannot be understood through theoretical abstraction alone. Young people were identified as being a particularly important focus in this respect in as much as they are arguably experiencing a period in their lives when questions of identity loom especially large, and during which, consumption *may*, itself, play some form of significant role in the construction of such an identity.

Having collected and analysed empirical data which was intended to construct some understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people, it will now be argued that this relationship is indeed significant, though such significance should not necessarily be assumed to be all-encompassing. The intention here, is not to suggest that what people consume amounts to a fundamental influence upon the construction of their identities, but rather that identities are inevitably multi-layered and that perhaps consumption plays some role in maintaining those layers. In effect, during this discussion, I will argue that though consumption does not directly construct young people's

identities, it provides a fundamental resource, in the form of a framework, which young people can use to stabilise other aspects of their lives.

During the course of Chapter 2, I argued that though the literature had identified an increasingly important role for consumption in the structuring of social life, the sociology of consumption, and indeed, cognate disciplines, were still struggling to find adequate means by which the ways in which this role was expressed in everyday social life could be addressed. Only on comparatively rare occasions, it was argued, did research manage to come to terms with the routine values and implications of the consuming experience (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Belk, 1988).

In Chapter 3, I went on to suggest that the relationship between consumption and identity was a particularly fascinating area in which grounded *research* needed to be developed. An attempt was made to illustrate the complexity of the issues at hand by highlighting the contributions of four major approaches to the question of identity namely: Erik Erikson; symbolic interactionism; social identity theory and postmodernism. Having conducted the research in the light of such a discussion, I would re-assert the contention I made in Chapter 3 that although none of the above approaches adequately comprehend the complexity of the notion of identity, and although none of them are flexible enough, in any integrated fashion, to incorporate questions of consumption, they all contribute to an overall understanding of the cultural and social construction of identities. For this reason I argued that for too long the routine situated aspects of the consuming experience have been neglected by social scientific research into consumption, and as such what was necessary was for such research to prioritise consumer *meanings*.

## Consumer meanings

At this point it is worth noting that consumer meanings are clearly a very rich source for developing an understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity, and more broadly, for an understanding of the role that consumption plays in the construction of people's everyday lives. From the very first stage of this research the enthusiasm and willingness with which young people were prepared to express the role which consumption plays in their lives tended to suggest that that role was a subject worthy of discussion. Methodologically speaking, it also became clear that the only way to construct a satisfactory conception of the research questions I identified in Chapter 6 was through a grounded and triangulated piece of research which attempted to deploy a variety of techniques. To this end, I hope to have illustrated, through my empirical work, the potential benefits of triangulated research that attempts to directly address consumer *meanings*.

What has emerged through the course of this research is the fact that whilst, as I argued in Chapter 3, identities are fluid, so too are consumer goods, which makes them ideal *resources* for the construction of identities. As I suggested in Chapter 6 consumption is clearly "social, relational and active" (Appadurai 1986, p. 31). It is indeed, "part of the repertory with which users carry out operations of their own" (deCerteau, 1984, p. 31). The adaptable and flexible nature of identity appears to be mirrored by the similar ways in which people use the active nature of consumer goods as a means of structuring social relations.

The overwhelming indication gleaned through the three phases of the research programme is that consumption provides young people with an invaluable source of confidence. This confidence is expressed in various ways: through the significance of fashion; through branded goods as indicators of self-confidence; and through the role of peer groups as arbiters of consumption patterns. Young

people regularly acknowledged such confidence-giving attributes throughout the three stages of my research. It soon became clear that what was significant about consumer goods was not some inherent use-value or quality, but the cultural capital that was invested in peer groups by significant others. Consumer meanings are culturally constructed, and as such amount to an important resource by which young people can communicate and interact with one another. As such, in Chapter 6 I suggested that “being amongst friends” was a super-ordinate construct. That is, in a world where traditional sources of identity are being broken down, young people are forced into a position where they are in need of primary sources of identity, in a world that can barely offer such a thing.

### **Consumption as a framework for the construction of identities**

My data therefore suggests that rather than consumption being a fundamental player in the construction of identities it amounts to what is, in fact, a means to an end. What appears to be fundamentally important to the identities of young people is the sense that they *feel* that they belong. Consumption provides a means, or a resource by which this can be achieved. Young people invest a lot of time and effort in friendship circles. Consumption represents an important ingredient in this process, in that it can be used as a means of ensuring the feeling of stability engendered by the sense that a particular individual has tastes in common with his or her peers. The peer group experience therefore appears to be very much based upon the individual’s need to glean confidence in group contexts.

It was not the intention of this thesis to construct an overall understanding of the process of identity construction, but rather, to begin to explicate the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people. In contrast to Bauman’s (1996) contention that the individual does not actually *want* stability, I argue that consumption, in effect, provides a stabilising framework, or

environment, in which young people can develop other aspects of their identities.

### **Consumption and risk**

In Chapter 4, I discussed the extent to which the everyday experience of young people is characterised by risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). That is, I suggested that the everyday life experience of young people is inevitably unstable. Such instability has important implications for the construction of identities and is closely related to what I said in Chapter 3 about the emergence of secondary forms of identity construction. Young people's lives are risky, because primary sources of identity such as family and community are no longer as influential as they have been in the past.

With the emergence of a youth market in the post-war years consumption appears to have become an increasingly important focus for young people's lives. In contemporary society consumption appears to offer the promise of alleviating some of the stress associated with everyday life in a risk society. By immersing themselves in consumer-led experiences young people appear to be able to forget about the stresses inherent in the prospects of a dilapidated labour market, divided families, and limited resources. Consumption appears to offer some form of an escape. But the use of the word 'escape' should not imply that young people are simply leaving that risk behind. In Chapter 3, I suggested that consumption could be perceived to be an easy option, a means of avoiding the harsh realities characteristic of an identity crisis. This is an over-simplification. More than simply opting out of a risky lifestyle, consumption actually appears to provide young people with a sense of control; a means of offsetting risk. But the irony here is that the risks inherent in social pressures to consume are potentially riskier than everyday experience itself. Young people find themselves in a predicament where, to a large extent, they *have* to consume in particular ways.



But this is *ultimately* a positive experience in as much as young people are able to develop a conscious means of having control over a world in which otherwise they feel powerless.

The above point was well illustrated during my participant observation. Upon entering the sports shop young people were able to forget, indeed, escape from, their everyday concerns. They became immersed in another culture, a culture symbolised by the street-life portrayed by MTV. In a world characterised by insecurity and uncertainty as to the future, as well as the present, young people can open this 'window of stability' and enter a whole new world; a world in which, regardless of family background or work prospects, they are treated as equals, in the sense that they have equal access, depending upon resources, to the cultural capital of consumption. Consumption provides a window of light, an escape, in young people's lives, but as was suggested throughout my focus group interviews, such a window complements other aspects of young people's identities. Most important, in this regard, is the influence of peer relations. During my focus groups, for instance, a number of references were made to the influential role played by the "college community".

### **Individual decisions or peer pressure?**

Young people claim to make their own consuming decisions. In addition, though young people regularly recognised that other peers owed similar items which gave them pleasure, they were not prepared to acknowledge the fact that this had any influence on their actual purchase of their goods.

My suggestion here is that any such influence is denied, in that to accept that this was the case could only threaten, or destabilise further, any sense of personal control and identity that young people had worked so hard to construct, in a world where young people have seemingly lost all semblance of control over the

everyday structures which frame their lives. In effect, I am suggesting that in a so-called postmodern world young people's identities are indeed constructed on very fragile grounds. Such fragility is compromised by the fact that the control they have built up can easily be eroded if people misconstrue their actions and 'accuse' them of being duped or of going with the crowd.

Peer groups therefore offer a means of monitoring the effectiveness of one's own identity. Young people feel insecure about their personal identities, and as such are intent on verifying those identities in social contexts. Appropriate patterns of consumption breed confidence which is based on communal underpinnings rather than individual styles or forms of expression. And herein lies the psycho-social power of consumption. It conforms, and yet as far as the consumer is concerned, it appears to liberate. This point is critical to the overall conclusion of this thesis and is central to the role which consumption plays in the construction of identities. Young people adopt consumption as a framework in which positive, largely peer-based, aspects of their identities can be established, because that framework appears to be an individualistic outlet, and yet at the same time provides all the comforts and stabilities characteristic of conformity.

Throughout both my focus groups and my participant observation, young people constantly acknowledged the impact of fashion on constructing the consumer choices of their peers, and yet simultaneously denied that this had any influence at all on their own choices. It is unacceptable for the young consumer to accept the possibility that he or she may be influenced by other people's consuming patterns. Young people are very keen to partake in a social group of similar taste. But it does not appear to be the case that young people decide upon a style and then choose a group which matched such styles, as would be the case if consumption was an entirely individualistic process. Rather, the appropriate style emerges out of a group consensus. Indeed, quite often, it does not appear to

matter what that taste is, as long as it is similar, 'retro' gear being a useful case in point here. In this respect, Simmel's (1971) point about the limited role of the actual aesthetic qualities of consumer goods is highly pertinent,

"Judging from the ugly and repugnant things that are sometimes in vogue, it would seem as though fashion were desirous of exhibiting its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its sake alone." (p. 297)

What Simmel describes is a very significant influence upon young people's lives, in that they feel safe in this context, whilst their personal sense of identity is protected by the fact that they are able to deny the influences that are engendered in their consumption choices.

During the course of the above discussions, I have identified four fundamental factors concerning the role which consumption plays in young people's lives:

- 1) consumption provides stability in potentially risky situations;
- 2) individual consumers make individual consuming decisions;
- 3) individuals deny that peer influence affects such decisions;
- 4) yet young people recognise that group influence affects other people's ' consumer decisions.

In combination, such factors provide a framework out of which young people can exploit their communal relations as a means of constructing an identity. Consumption provides young people with a sense of *control*.

### **Constructing realities**

As far as the social role of consumption is concerned what the above conclusions appears to reinforce, above all, is that, as I suggested in Chapter 3, people are not

passive recipients of inputs of consumption. Consumption is essentially interactive, or more specifically *psycho-social*.

At this stage, I should consider the argument that though consumption is significant in terms of young people's identity constructions; this has no longer term significance, as far as the construction of identities throughout the remainder of the life-course is concerned. The danger here is that by getting preoccupied with young people's patterns of consumption, an assumption is made about our lives being continuous; that is, that everything that we do, from a chronological point of view, has implications for the future and for 'progress' in our lives. The argument here, is that consumption may not necessarily have any long term implications for the construction of identity, in the sense that because young people prioritise consumption at this stage of their lives, they may not necessarily do so later in life. I am suggesting that consumption does indeed play an especially important at this stage of a young person's life, precisely because they are desperately in need of finding a well structured focus for their lives, during a period when issues of identity construction appear to be especially important to them. Identity 'work' appears to be especially difficult and preoccupying around the teenage years when young people experience the difficult transitions associated with the period between childhood and adulthood, although it may well be that as a person develops through the life-course such work actually gets easier, and questions of identity do not loom quite as large. As far as young people are concerned, consumption merely provides a framework within which young people can stabilise other aspects of their everyday lives, not least in the interactive relationships through which their relationships and hence their identities are expressed, and through which they can personally 'progress'. I shall return to the issue of how best to come to terms with the long term implications of consumption for identity construction, during the course of my methodological conclusions, later in this chapter.

What can be said at this stage is that identities adapt to the ups and downs of the life-course. Consumption is just one, nonetheless significant, means of adjusting to the fluidity of everyday life, of giving such fluidity a constant, though adaptable focus. The stability engendered in such a focus is an essential ingredient for the construction of a satisfactory sense of identity. Such identity emerges out of a sense of individuality. This again illustrates the point I have been trying to make about the debate over structure and agency. The structures are there, and do provide a framework within which young people conduct their everyday lives. But ultimately the point here, as was reiterated throughout my empirical chapters, is that those young people construct their own realities within those structures. In effect, "If men [*sic*] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, p. 572).

Regardless of the structural influences on an individual's life, what is ultimately most important is what young people perceive to be *real* and the consequential identity developments that emerge out of this sense of reality are of equal, and if not more significance, than the 'actualities' of social structures. Young people recognise the ubiquitous nature of consumption in contemporary society, but apparently underestimate its personal influence. Regardless of whether or not, this is actually an underestimation from an objective point of view, what is important here is that this is a *subjective* conception of reality. In effect, young people's identities are the direct consequence of some very personal, and yet very real, choices which amount to attempts to gain control over their everyday lives. Young people make the sorts of definitions identified by Thomas and Thomas (1928) through these choices, and the actual resultant identities are the consequences of these choices.

## **Structure and agency**

What I am arguing here then, is that young people use consumption as a framework within which they can develop aspects of their identities. In this sense, consumption might be described as providing young people with a means of accomplishing identity 'work', notably through the reduction of risk, and the building of confidence, in communal contexts. However, the issue as to how far such identity 'work' is the result of the agency of young people and how far it is a result of the imposed structures of consumer culture remains a matter for intense debate.

In Chapter 5, I identified Giddens' approach to structuration as a particularly useful means of relating consumption to the question of structure and agency. The data which I collected throughout this research reinforces Giddens' (1991) contention that material objects are transformed through social life into resources which thereby construct codes and normative sanctions. As such, my evidence seems to confirm Giddens' contention that young people actively and creatively interpret the process of commodification. In this sense, Bourdieu's (1984) notion of the habitus is also useful. Consumption does indeed appear to provide young people with the cultural dispositions and sensibilities that structure group behaviour, whilst simultaneously providing a mechanism for the structuring of social experience. Consumption is, in effect, a bridge that links structure and agency.

The interdependent nature of structure and agency and the way in which the individual negotiates his or her own interpretation of structures, has important implications for the construction of young people's identities. What postmodern discourses, in particular, appear to underestimate, is the ability for consumers to construct their own sense of identity. One approach that could be said to deal with these sorts of issues, broadly speaking within the debate concerning

postmodernity, is that of Maffesoli (1996) whose work is worth a brief consideration.

In his discussion of 'the time of the tribes' Maffesoli argues for the power of the basic sociality of everyday life, and thus his notion of 'tribus' serves to develop some understanding of the inter-relationships that exist between individual and collective forms of consumption. As such, Maffesoli (1996) claims that the contemporary life experience is marked by membership of a variety of inter-connecting groups in which the roles one plays provides the individual with masks of identity (Shields, 1996). Thus the conformism of youth and its relationship with fashion, argues Maffesoli (1996), amounts to the loss of the idea of the individual. This 'indistinct' massification determines that there is no longer any need, as such, for the notion of individual identity. Thus, Maffesoli goes on to assert that, "identity in all its various manifestations is above all the willingness to be something determined" (p. 65). Maffesoli (1996) argues that we imagine that we are not alone and that group or 'tribal' contexts have a stabilising role in constructing who it is we are. An individual's life experience in a postmodern world therefore becomes increasingly dependant upon the social relations of tribalism within which consumer culture plays an influential role .

Although there may appear to be some sense in arguing that social life is increasingly characterised by fragmented tribal groupings, Maffesoli's work does little to construct any sort of grounded sense of what *meanings* individual's construct in these contexts. Maffesoli implies that the individual (if he or she in fact exists) is dependant upon the need to feel safe; the need to be determined. This argument may indeed be of interest. But notwithstanding Maffesoli's theoretical insights, the practical value of his work is empirically unsupported. As I have argued both in Chapter 2 and elsewhere (Miles, 1995; 1996), theories about the construction of identities should emerge out of grounded, triangulated

and focused empirical investigation. Unless they do so, they will continue to amount to nothing more than an apparently resonant, though ultimately unsatisfying enterprise.

The debate as to whether there is any such thing as 'individual' identity will continue. However, my suggestion is that such identities do exist in the realities constructed by young people. Maffesoli (1996) does not consider those realities as such. In the risky world occupied by young people, identity constructions are undoubtedly becoming increasingly difficult. In as much as the primary sources of identity, which I discussed in Chapter 5, have been undermined, it is harder for a person, young or old, to build a coherent sense of identity. But people do manage to achieve this because they are able to interpret structures as a means of constructing their own realities; they are able to use the structures of consumption to their own ends.

In effect, the relationships which young people have with the goods they purchase, illustrate that they are essentially modernists, in the sense that they recognise the breadth of the menu available to them but pick out what they feel is appropriate in their given circumstances. The breadth of the menu, as such, is not actually used. Young people appear to make judgements about what forms of consumption are appropriate within their construction of reality (hence the difference on pages 174 - 175 between Elizabeth's idea of what was appropriate, in comparison to the rest of her more consumer-oriented focus group), changing those forms of consumption as that sense of reality changes. But the choices they do make help them to maintain a coherent sense of individuality. Their consumption habits are not whimsical but help to maintain the sense of personal 'progress' I mentioned earlier. This point goes back to what I said at the end of Chapter 9 about the *rational* constraints that influence young people's everyday lives. Young people actively indulge in identity 'work' in which consumption is a



prime resource. They thereby have constructive relationships with consumer goods. But these relationships are also shaped by rational constraints. On the surface young people's consumption habits may appear to be non-rational, in a postmodern sense of stylish juxtaposition, but ultimately such juxtapositions reflect rational modernist motivations, namely the maintenance of a stable sense of identity. The actual goods that young people consume, and the ways in which they use those goods to construct a framework by which they can partially construct their identities, vary, in light of a rational balancing-act between a sense of personal stability and group acceptance. The balance of a young person's consumer profile is underpinned, in effect, by the rational pursuit of personal stability in a group context.

It is therefore wrong to imply, as do many commentators associated with debates over postmodernism, that identities can be picked and mixed, partly through choices in consumption (see Featherstone, 1991). Though I have argued that identities are fluid, the role of consumption in this process, I would suggest, is to structure that fluidity and in this sense identities are picked and *stabilised* by the social and cultural contexts from which they emanate.

### **Consumerism as ideology**

At this point I need to return to the question of consumerism as ideology. What I have said up to now may seem to imply that ultimately consumption has a limited ideological impact, due to the ability on the part of individual's to meaningfully interpret the impact of consumer goods. At another extreme you could argue that consumption is the new "opium of the people" (Marx and Engels, 1844, p.42), and that young people are the most susceptible group to this opium; the argument being that young people are shielded from the reality of their material conditions by the superficial appeal of a consumerist lifestyle. Willis' (1995) discussion of consumption at Disney World is interesting in this

respect, in as much as she highlights some of the tensions that exist between the sense of collectivity that consumption appears to offer, and such an offers underlying ideological dimension,

“when collectivity is articulated with consumption it redounds in free market capitalism. It may be haunted by the utopian desire for fully developed and vital community, but it is shackled to its anti-utopian antithesis, the “me first” thinking associated with the quick commodity fix.” (p. 52)

I would suggest that this approach underestimates the personal value of the collective experience of consumption. The “me first” thinking that Willis discusses is perhaps not what is important here. What is more important is the personal sense of security that “me first in the context of them” thinking, actively offers the individual. The fact, as I suggested in Chapter 5, that personal meaning effectively obscures the impact of ideology, should not lead to the assumption that the individual is unaware of the ideological impact of consumption. As far as an individual’s identity is concerned, it is sometimes in his or her best interest to willingly abide by the ideological parameters that have been laid down. This is, especially true when you consider the difficulties that are associated with unstable and insecure nature of contemporary youth transitions.

To illustrate the point that consumption often amounts to an individual’s interpretation of structural influences, I will return to the thought of Karl Marx (1954) who argued that “Men make history, but... not under circumstances chosen by themselves” (p. 10). What has emerged from both my data, and the theoretical insights which flowed from that data, is that ‘young people construct their identities partially through the framework that consumption provides, but not through products chosen by themselves’. Identities are, as I suggest above,

ultimately an individual negotiation of reality, which is contextualised by structural influences. As Cashmore and Mullan (1983) put it,

“if human beings are subject to forces beyond their conscious control, can they be seen to have any say in steering their own futures and implementing changes as they deem appropriate?” (p. 87)

Are indeed, human beings more than dupes subject to the power of structural constraints? I would contend that the evidence above suggests that, in fact, they interact with forces that *are*, at least to an extent, within their conscious control.

There should remain no doubt that potentially consumption has significant ideological elements. Consumer capitalism thrives in as much as it suggests that consumers can endow meaning in consumer goods completely freely. This cannot be possible in a world where advertising and marketing are such powerful institutional influences, apparently impinging on a wide variety of aspects of everyday life. As such, ideologically, consumption operates at both an immediate and very subtle level. By consuming a pair of training shoes, for example, an individual not only buys comfort and a communal sense of well-being, but also legitimises a way of life. By consuming a pair of training shoes the individual asserts his or her rights as a citizen of consumer culture, and effectively accepts the status quo (see Urry, 1990). It could, indeed, be argued in this context that the status quo is all that is on offer to the individual, partly because the individual cost of denying any sort of role for consumption in everyday settings is potentially too psycho-socially risky. It is almost as if an individual can offset the risks of everyday life by consuming, as my sample suggests, in similar ways to their peers; the only alternative being to face those risks head on.

In Chapter 7, I discussed the way in which Foot Locker encouraged its employees to take on chameleon-like qualities. The way in which they were encouraged by the company's training philosophy to reinvent themselves for each individual customer. In this respect, I would argue that the chameleon-like figure of the Foot Locker employee is symbolic of the ideological influence of consumer capitalism. Foot Locker workers cannot be chameleon-like, at least not in any real sense. All that they can do is retain the illusion that they can be. As such, they all wear the same uniform, they all smile at their customers, and they all employ standard preconceived ways of approaching customers. They may alter the conversations they have with their customers from time to time, but essentially they initiate those discussions along pre-established lines.

Similarly, consumer capitalism claims to offer chameleon-like qualities to the consumer. It claims to be able to offer the young consumer a real sense of identity through an apparently perpetually diverse array of goods. It claims to be able to reinvent itself in a chameleon-like fashion in order to offer a diversity of goods that can be moulded by the individual, in order to fit his or her individual profile. However, consumer capitalism and the goods it offers in this equation are far from chameleon-like. Herein lies a great irony. Consumer capitalism is still dependant upon mass production and mass consumption which appears emancipatory under the guise of individualised consumption; hence the example of 'retro' training shoes. Individuals are able to feel that they consume individually by purchasing a particular colour of training shoe, when all around them are in fact wearing the same shoe, but in slightly different shades. They are consuming what is essentially a mass produced product. Both the Foot Locker employee and consumer capitalism have pretensions to appear to be what the Foot Locker training literature describes as "chameleon-like". In fact, both are governed by restrictions, namely uniformity of production and of consumption, that determine that the reality can only be otherwise: standardisation. However

friendly Foot Locker may appear to be to consumers, such friendliness is inevitably mass produced, and underpinned by the fact that that particular individual is intent on maximising sales in order to maximise his or her monthly bonus. Similarly, however reassuringly stable, and yet individualistic, purchasing a pair of 'retro' training shoes might be, underpinned by the profit motive, such trainers appear to harbour an ideological dimension of which the consumer is blissfully uncritical, and perhaps even, unaware. Ultimately, however, it is the appearance of such, that is, in itself, illusory, in as much as young consumers are fully aware of this ideological dimension. It is just that such awareness is only expressed in their role as a third party commenting upon their peers consumption patterns.

The data collected in my three stages of empirical work illustrate that young people are aware, at least to an extent, of the ways in which the ideology of consumerism is expressed. They are aware of the power of advertising, as was illustrated during my Consumer Meanings Questionnaire, they are aware of group pressures on consumption, most evident during my focus groups, and they are aware of the pressures that surround them to partake in a consumer culture. But they are prepared, subconsciously, to give up a certain degree of individuality in exchange for the personal security that this provides them. The point here, is that however much these young people appear to be controlled, within that framework of control they are able to construct their own realities, and in this sense are in fact *in control* themselves. Regardless of the structural influences upon young peoples lives, as sociologists, we need to consider consumers interpretations of such structures, and not some perceived absolute truth of what constitutes and structures these lives.

## Postmodern ideology

I want to address the above arguments in the context of the debate I raised in Chapter 5 about the relationship between postmodernism and ideology. Hawkes (1996) argues that there might be an argument for describing postmodernism as the ideology of consumer capitalism. In this sense, Hawkes' discussion of the work of Žižek (1989) is useful. Žižek, reinforcing what I have suggested above, argues that ideology is not something that merely affects our ideas but happens to the totality of our existence. Ideology is common-sense,

“‘ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness’, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’... ‘Ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a social being but this being in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness.’” (p. 21)

In this sense, Žižek argues that there is nothing illusory about ideology, which he sees as accurately responding to reality. As far as Žižek is concerned postmodern theory amounts to the ideology of consumer capitalism. Although he agrees that with the postmodern contention that metaphors of depth are untenable, he argues that the finance-based economy is equally depthless in this sense, causing dire consequences for the individual. Žižek (1989) goes as far as to claim that the commodity economy destroys the subject. But the problem here is that postmodern theorists tend not to apply the so-called death of the subject directly to commodification, and therefore appear to enthusiastically endorse such a turn of events,

“Far from containing any kind of subversive potentials, the dispersed, plural, constructed subjects hailed by postmodern theory (the subject prone to particular, inconsistent modes of enjoyment, etc.) simply

designates the form of subjectivity that corresponds to late capitalism.”  
(Zizek, 1989, p. 216)

Ideology then, has become materialised, and as such, Zizek believes that we are living a lie which, because we live it, becomes real (Hawkes, 1996). This, then, relates to what Thomas and Thomas (1928) say about reality mounting to what the individual *perceives* to be reality, and in turn to what Dittmar (1992) refers to as the materialism-idealism paradox; that is the commonly accepted idea that every individual has a unique personality independent of material circumstances, alongside the paradoxical notion that material possessions are central regulators, not only of large-scale social processes, but also of interpersonal relations and impressions. In a so-called postmodern world an individual may lose his or her subjectivity amidst a plethora of lifestyle choices, and yet the society in which he or she lives puts considerable emphasis on the uniqueness of each and every person.

There is no recipe by which the relationship between consumerism, ideology, and the individual experience of consumption can be fully explicated. Young people experience a vast diversity of complex social structures, all of which impinge upon their everyday lives. As an ideology, consumerism has, in an historical sense, increasingly come to affect mundane and everyday aspects of young people’s lives. The point is that at the everyday level that ideology is a negotiated ideology and it is the way in which such ideologies are negotiated in everyday common-sensical settings that is of sociological interest. Ultimately, the personal factor, as Swingewood (1991) notes, is a constitutive factor of every social occurrence,

“social science cannot remain on the surface... but must reach the actual human experiences and attitudes which constitute the full, live and actual

reality beneath the formal organisation of social institutions.” (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1927, p. 1834)

As far as I can make conclusions about the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people, I am arguing that this relationship is a social and cultural construction. Social life amounts to a web of meanings which can be described as reality definitions (see Cashmore and Mullan, 1983). Consumers use consumption as a means of defining their realities. Consumers, in effect, define their own reality, and if consumption is defined as significant within that reality, then so be it.

Identities are influenced by all sorts of factors, including race, gender, family upbringing and so on. Consumption may not have as much long term significance as any of these factors, but for some young people it plays an invaluable role in maintaining a stable sense of coherence with which these other factors can interact. Identities are fluid, and consumption helps to ensure that such fluidity is manageable. For instance, it became clear, notably during my participant observation, that there were particular codes of consumption which related to membership of an ethnic group. For instance, the street style of black working class youths amounted to a powerful source of cultural capital which, in itself, had a significant role to play in constructing how many of those entering the shop, black or white, actually felt about themselves. Equally, gender clearly came across as a significant means of constructing young people’s identities, and consumer goods were there to be used in a fashion that was appropriate in reasserting such identities. To reiterate, consumption is a valuable tool in asserting *aspects* of young people’s identities.



## Methodological conclusions

At this stage, I want to make some concluding comments about methodological aspects of this research. The first question to ask is how successful have the methods I adopted been in answering my research questions. Methodologically, the underlying theme of this thesis has been the attempt to address, empirically, the ways in which young people endow consumer goods with personal meanings. I would briefly like to consider the success of each of the methods I deployed in this respect.

My *focus groups* provided me with a wealth of data which highlighted the complexity of the issues at hand, simultaneously serving to illustrate the significance of the role that consumption played in young peoples lives. I would suggest that this group-based source of material is especially productive in addressing consumer meanings, in the sense that those meanings are socially and culturally constructed. Once I became familiar with how to conduct a focus group interview effectively, and once I had developed the confidence necessary to ensure that the groups concerned identified their own relevant agendas, the potential of such a method became clear. In this sense the use of visual techniques proved especially productive. Indications were that the more the methods I used moved away from the abstract and focused on the visual realities of the consuming experience, the potentially richer the data. In this sense the results gained from Personal Construct Psychology, which I also discussed in Chapter 7, were somewhat mixed in as much as there were some, though limited, misunderstandings, on the part of my respondents, as to the nature of the methods concerned. In the final analysis, in order to fulfil the potential of this particular approach, alternative ways of adapting methods which capture the imagination of respondents might well need to be developed. As I suggested earlier this research provided only a small taste of what Personal Construct Psychology can achieve in this context.

My *participant observation* also provided a rich source by which I could address consumer meanings. Though I was constrained by my role as a sales assistant, in the extent to which I could construct a detailed understanding of such meanings (my respondents often perceiving my role as a functional rather than discursive one), the potential for exploring this sort of naturalistic research route appears to be self-evident. The way ahead in this respect might be to conduct participant observations in alternative venues, such as shopping malls; or in a broader sense, as far as the sociology of consumption is concerned, at car boot sales, markets, or in the context of home-based forms of shopping, such as home selling, which is likely to become increasingly popular as shopping technologies continue to evolve (see Hewson, 1994). Above all, however, it seems likely that most benefit would be gained from conducting such research in locations, such as youth clubs, where people actively construct relationships with and through the goods they consume. By developing research that addresses directly the sorts of social and cultural processes I have discussed during the course of this thesis, it may be possible to develop an understanding of not only the meanings consumers have for what it is they consume, but further to this, the role that consumption has in actively constructing social relationships. This is an issue that this research has raised, but one that needs to be developed further.

My *Consumer Meanings Questionnaire* provided an additional angle on the research questions concerning this thesis. The data that came out of the first two stages of the research was put into focus in the latter stage, at which point some degree of generalisability as to the meanings with which young people endow consumer goods was established. It should not necessarily be assumed that questionnaire research is too inflexible to be used as a means of addressing the fluidity of consumer meanings, notably in the context of identity construction. Questionnaires, as I discussed in Chapter 9, undoubtedly have their limitations,

but can be used as a means of extending the insights provided by complimentary methods.

In the context of the above methodological points, Stones' (1996) call for a "past-modern" sociology is of interest. There is, indeed, a need to find a middle way between 'sociological modernism' and what Stones describes as 'defeatist postmodernism'. The former underestimates the complexity of the social world and overestimates the ability of the sociologist to construct a 'true' understanding of that world, whilst the latter sees sociological analyses as being no better than a mere fictional account. As such,

"sociology needs to provide itself with guidelines on how to traverse the bridges and the junctions that connect the insights of ontology and high theory to the empirical evidence necessary to make claims about the real world of any one moment... we need to maintain a clear sense of the real, but... we also need to acknowledge the complexity of that real and the enormous demands of subtlety that this imposes upon anyone wanting to come anywhere near an apprehension of it in a given time and place."

(Stones, 1996, p. 1)

As far as the sociology of consumption is concerned, guidelines which would lead to the mid-way stance which Stones advocates are as yet unavailable. But what I do hope to have illustrated during the course of this thesis is that there are benefits available to those prepared to relate contextual situated studies to broader theoretical concerns. Only then can the everyday reality of consumption as a social process begin to be adequately addressed.

My main methodological conclusion is therefore that for any of the above to be possible triangulation represents a particularly fruitful and valid means of

constructing modest, reflexive accounts of social realities. Alone, none of the methods I have used have sufficient sophistication to provide any answers to what are ultimately very complex questions. Although triangulation can never provide all the answers, together, such methods can begin, at least, to peel away some of the mysteries inherent in the role that consumerism comes to play in constructing everyday social experience.

It is important, at this stage, to reiterate that the intention of this thesis has not been to resolve any definitive understanding of the relationship between consumption and identity amongst young people. Indeed, as I suggested in chapter 5, this is too complex a question to be answered with any sort of immediate authority. Rather, I have endeavoured to construct what might be described as a test case; a test case which has attempted to illustrate the advantages of addressing, directly, the meanings which are invested in consumer goods. I have therefore tried to highlight the way such insights can be applied in an understanding of the significance of consumption in contemporary society. I have also been able to use a diversity of tools to address these meanings, in order that I might establish as triangulated a picture of the consumption experience as possible. By doing so I hope to encourage other scholars to adopt similar methods and to adapt their own innovative ways of addressing consumer meanings.

Inevitably, this research, like research in general, has only been able to take snapshots of the processes under investigation. I have provided a snapshot of the role of consumption in constructing the experiences and identities of young people. In particular, I focused on the experience of young people in sixth form colleges. In this respect, my sample is limited in that the findings I have collected are only generalisable to young people continuing in education. Further research needs to be developed which addresses the experience of employed, and indeed,

unemployed, youth, in order that a more rounded understanding of the relationship between youth consumption and identity might be developed.

More ambitiously, the obvious way forward is to construct a more thoroughgoing analysis of the role of consumption in people's lives throughout the life-course. This raises the question as to whether or not the life-course is continuous and what role consumption plays during that life-course. The first priority is to establish some form of long term understanding of the impact of consumption upon people's lives. Through longitudinal research, it might be possible to begin to come to terms with the long-term impact of consumption. For instance, how far will the influence of consumerism upon this generation of young people affect their adult lives? Will today's consumers of Game Boy's and roller blades become tomorrow's consumers of state-of-the-art caravans and camcorders?

Though it should be noted that the drawbacks of longitudinal research are widely recognised, such as the time that needs to be invested in this sort of a project, and the associated demand on resources, if used correctly, this type of research could provide us with a rich source of data regarding the consuming experience. By establishing what it is that constitutes the changing influence of consumption upon people's lives, the ephemeral nature of consumption and its relationship to the fluid nature of identities might begin to be established.

As I have emphasised throughout this thesis, the need for a triangulated grounded approach appears to be paramount and any longitudinal approach to the relationship between consumption and identity should use a variety of techniques in order to address what are very complicated issues. In this respect, the attributes of life histories should be carefully considered (Giddens, 1989). For instance, Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) made extensive use of life history

material in order to construct an insightful analysis of the actual experience of migration. This sort of approach is particularly effective in addressing people's conceptions of experiences, and thus has considerable potential for addressing the meanings which consumers invest in the consuming experience.

Perhaps an even more critical point to make at this stage is, as I argued in Chapter 6, that the issues I have been considering throughout this thesis cannot be effectively be understood from blinkered single-disciplinary perspectives. This is an issue I considered in detail in Chapter 2, and which I tried to deal with during the course of this research, by adapting techniques associated with Personal Construct Psychology. This research is clearly largely sociological in nature and, as such, my intention has been to point out possible directions in which inter-disciplinary approaches to the consumption and identity relationship might develop. Personal Construct Psychology provides one such option. But the main point here is that the boundaries between structure and agency are clearly blurred, and quite simply do not fall conveniently into single disciplines.

This research, and it's self-evident emphasis on the question of identity, has reinforced my contention, in Chapter 6, that there is particular need for collaboration between sociologists and psychologists. That is, there appears to be significant evidence to suggest that consumption has a fundamental role to play in structuring individual everyday experience in social settings. This is a fascinating issue that social scientists of consumption should continue to pursue. Meaning is negotiated by the individual socially. Meaning cannot be constructed individually from outside social structures. Neither can social structures completely determine the nature of individual meaning. Meaning is, in effect, *real*, and sociologists of consumption need to investigate the social construction of *realities*. The complexities of the consumer experience can only be understood

with the adoption of innovative research techniques which address the question of the psycho-social construction of *meaning*.

### **Concluding comments**

A major issue that this research has consistently highlighted is that regardless of its ideological dimensions, consumption *can* offer young people an invaluable source of social, and by implication, personal meaning. It is all too easy to assume that consumption has a necessarily negative impact upon young people's identities. Such common-sensical notions have to be balanced with the acknowledgement that consumption plays an invaluable role in stabilising unstable aspects of young people's everyday lives. The complex nature of the relationship between consumption and identity remains unsubstantiated precisely because issues concerning consumption, identity, youth, structure and agency, and ideology, have been considered in isolation, without highlighting the complexities evident in their inter-relationships. Such complexities can only be understood if their impact is considered in routine social settings. As Giddens (1991) notes, ontological security is actively sustained *through* routine. In a so-called postmodern world, modern rational factors maintain this sense of routine and thereby underlie the construction of young people's identities. If the need to maintain a sense of stability and acceptance are important to young people, then it should also be important to the further development of an effective sociology of consumption.

The sociology of consumption will continue to provide a focus for sustained theoretical debate and discussion, but can only do so effectively, if it bears the above concerns in mind. Such debate cannot and should not continue to lose sight of the situated basis of its subject matter: the routine everyday experience of the consumer. By combining theoretical thought with empirical insight, it might be possible to begin to alleviate the postmodern image of a redundant

sociologist, unable to do anything more than describe a social experience which some theorists claim no longer even exists. The social experience does exist, and it is the sociologist's responsibility to both find it and explain it. Consumption represents a significant focus of analysis within this equation because it provides a fundamentally important arena in which consumers, and more specifically young people, cope with the tensions evident in the everyday maintenance of the relationship between the individual and society.



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## Appendix 1

### *Pilot Interview Schedule*

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this discussion. My name is Steve Miles and what I hope to talk about today is you! I'm interested in what sorts of things add up to determine how a person feels like an individual, that is what adds up to make a person's identity. What it is that makes you who you are, this is the sort of thing we'll be considering in the next hour and a quarter or so.

I'd like to emphasise that the idea of this sort of group discussion is to get as many different points of view as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. I'm interested in whatever you've got to say, however irrelevant it may appear to you at first. If you disagree with what someone has said, all well and good. Often negative comments are more helpful than positive ones.

Before we begin, I'd better point out some of the ground rules. Most importantly perhaps I should say that I'm tape-recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. Please try not to talk all at once, because then the tape will get all garbled and I'll miss some of your comments. I must stress that no records of the interview will be kept with your names on it. I can promise complete confidentiality.

Moving on, don't worry if the discussion appears to come to a dead end. Just remember what we're interested in is identity and we want as many different points of view on this as possible. So often someone will think of something that hasn't come up yet and the discussion will get back on the right track. I'll jump in if I have to, but normally one of you will do that for me. Also, I am especially interested in specific examples of your own experience. Try and think of any concrete examples of any of the issues we discuss.

One more thing. Please try not to all talk at once as this causes problems when I come to listen to the tapes!

Right then. Let's start.

1) First of all, I want to ask you something dead easy. That is what did you do last Saturday? Ask respondents one by one. Then opening out to a general discussion. Is this something you do regularly? Is it important to you or just something you do to fill in time? Do you feel like the same person doing this, as you do if you were socialising with your friends? Do you consciously act differently? Probing especially important when issue of shopping comes up.

eg. I go into town. What do you do in town? Shopping? Do you buy anything or do you just browse? Do you often see many of your friends in town? Are the things you buy important to you as person? Do you spend a lot of money on clothes? etc. etc.

2) How important do you think your friends are in how you develop as a person. Are you or other people greatly influenced by what their friends are like?

a) If so what is it about your friends that would influence you? eg. character, looks - physical and material, interests.

b) Do you think that young people generally make a conscious effort to be like their friends in these sorts of ways?

c) Are there any other groups of people that influence you as a person? eg. Parents, teachers, somebody on TV, neighbours. Why and how?

3) Now what I want to do is quickly go round the group, one by one and ask people what three things off the top of your heads that sum you up as a person. It doesn't matter how stupid or trivial it sounds, it's just so we get thinking in the right ways. I'll start the ball rolling. Right, my name's Steve: I'm a researcher, I play a lot of football and I read a lot! Anybody else?

Why did you think x was important? Do you think this marks you as different from other people? Or do you feel that you and your friends tend to do more or less the same things? What is it you like about x type of music?

4) I've brought with me a few different pictures of people taken from magazines. What sort of things if any do you think you could say about the identity of these people from these pictures?

a) How important do you think the things people wear are to their identity? What about other consumer goods such as CD's, electronic equipment, magazines, sportswear?

b) Is it really possible to make any assumptions from surface appearances about what people are like?

5) Are there any important issues that you think we should mention that we haven't covered yet?

Thank you. Before we close, can I briefly summarise what we've said..... (major issues arising during interview).

Does that cover the general gist of our discussion? (If an apparent disagreement ask for clarification).

Thank you for all your help. Everything that has been said during the course of this interview will be treated confidentially.

## **Appendix 2**

### ***Finalised Focus Group Interview Schedule***

#### ***Interview 1) Question Based Group***

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this discussion. My name is Steve Miles and what I hope to talk about today is you! I'm interested in what sorts of things add up to determine how a person feels like an individual, that is what adds up to make a person's identity. What it is that makes you who you are, this is the sort of thing we'll be considering in the next hour or so. Might sound a bit weird but it's dead straightforward really.

I'd like to emphasise that the idea of this sort of group discussion is to get as many different points of view as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. I'm interested in whatever you've got to say, however irrelevant it may appear to you at first. If you disagree with what someone has said, all well and good. Often negative comments are more helpful than positive ones.

Before we begin, I'd better point out some of the ground rules. Most importantly perhaps I should say that I'm tape-recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. Please try not to talk all at once, because then the tape will get all garbled and I'll miss some of your comments. I must stress that no records of the interview will be kept with your names on it. I can promise complete confidentiality.

Moving on, don't worry if the discussion appears to come to a dead end. Just remember what we're interested in is what it is that makes you who you are and we want as many different points of view on this as possible. So often someone will think of something that hasn't come up yet and the discussion will get back on the right track. I'll jump in if I have to, but normally one of you will do that for me. Also, I am especially interested in specific examples of your own experience. Try and think of any concrete examples of any of the issues we discuss.

TAKE NAMES IN SEATING PLAN

### Question 1:

Right then. To start please could you write down on the card provided 5 LEISURE activities that you have done this week. These could be anything from sport, to going out or whatever. Then think of the one that you would most hate to give up and then rank the activities 1 to 5. 1 you'd least like to give up. 5 the one you wouldn't mind giving up.

Is shopping on your list? Is it something you do regularly? Is shopping an important activity to them as individuals? If not ask them if they would like to ADD IT TO THEIR LISTS AND RANK IT ACCORDINGLY.

### TAKE IN LISTS

Ask whether or not it is common for them and their friends to meet in the town and if so do they often look around the shops.

How often do they buy things and which shops are the most popular?

Do you see shopping as an important leisure activity?

What about people your age generally?

What do you actually feel like when you go out and buy something for yourself?

Name brands important?

50 QUID.

### TURN TAPE OVER?

### Question 2 :

Now what I want to do is quickly go round the group, one by one and ask people what three things off the top of your heads sum you up as a person. This can include interests, characteristics or anything about them that they can think of on the spot. I'll start the ball rolling. My name's Steve. I'm a researcher, I play football and I read quite a lot.

Why do you think x is important to you? Do you think this marks you off as different to other people? Or do you feel that you and your friends do and like more or less the same things?

Are the things they buy important to them or is it just everybody else that is "brainwashed" by the consumer culture?

Would they think anything less of somebody who didn't have the latest CD player?

Do teenagers generally place importance on what a person looks like, what music he or she listens to, or what electronic equipment he or she owns.

### **Question 3:**

How important are your friends? Do they have an important influence on how you are as a person? For instance does the fact that you're friends are interested in something eg. certain types of music influence you. Would it be very easy for you to say "No, I am not interested in this or that sort of music?"

Do you think young people generally make a conscious effort to be part of a group, to be like their friends rather than be themselves?

Checklist of potentially influential groups ie. Family, employers (if any), teachers, neighbours, media figures.

To conclude I will ask my groups if they feel that there is anything the group has not covered that they feel is important to how they are as a person.

PLEASE DON'T TELL THE OTHERS TOO MUCH ABOUT WHAT WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT TODAY IS IT MIGHT BIAS THE RESULTS. THANKS VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP IT'S BEEN REALLY USEFUL. SEE YOU NEXT WEEK.

## Appendix 3

### *Interview 2) Visually-based group exercises*

Present my groups with 5 pictures/photographs, SPREAD AROUND THE GROUP:

Questions:

What would your friends think if you turned up at college one day looking like this? Or the gender equivalent.

How might you react if your friends changed their image and looked like one of the photos instead. Would it matter to you? If so why? Is image really important?

Would other teenagers your age think less of you for not having the latest stuff? Are brand names important?

FINISH AFTER 20/25 MINUTES

Present the selection of photos of consumer goods. Now, what I want you to do is to match them up as far as you can to the people in the photos.

Now I want you as a group to come to some agreement as to what goods match which person. Which person is likely to have bought which object on the paper. Somebody with neat writing can put a name by each picture. If you don't think any of the 5 would have any of the goods then that's okay. Try not to all talk at once whilst you're doing it, the tape recorder is still recording.

Give them 10 minutes.

Having done that, I want each of you to write on the bit of paper provided which of the goods could you see yourself buying if you had enough money. Be sensible, you haven't got unlimited funds.

Give them 3/4 minutes.

How did you make decisions about what goods were associated with what people? Can people really be pigeon-holed like that?

Do you feel that the goods you chose for yourself somehow reflect your personality or who you are as a person?

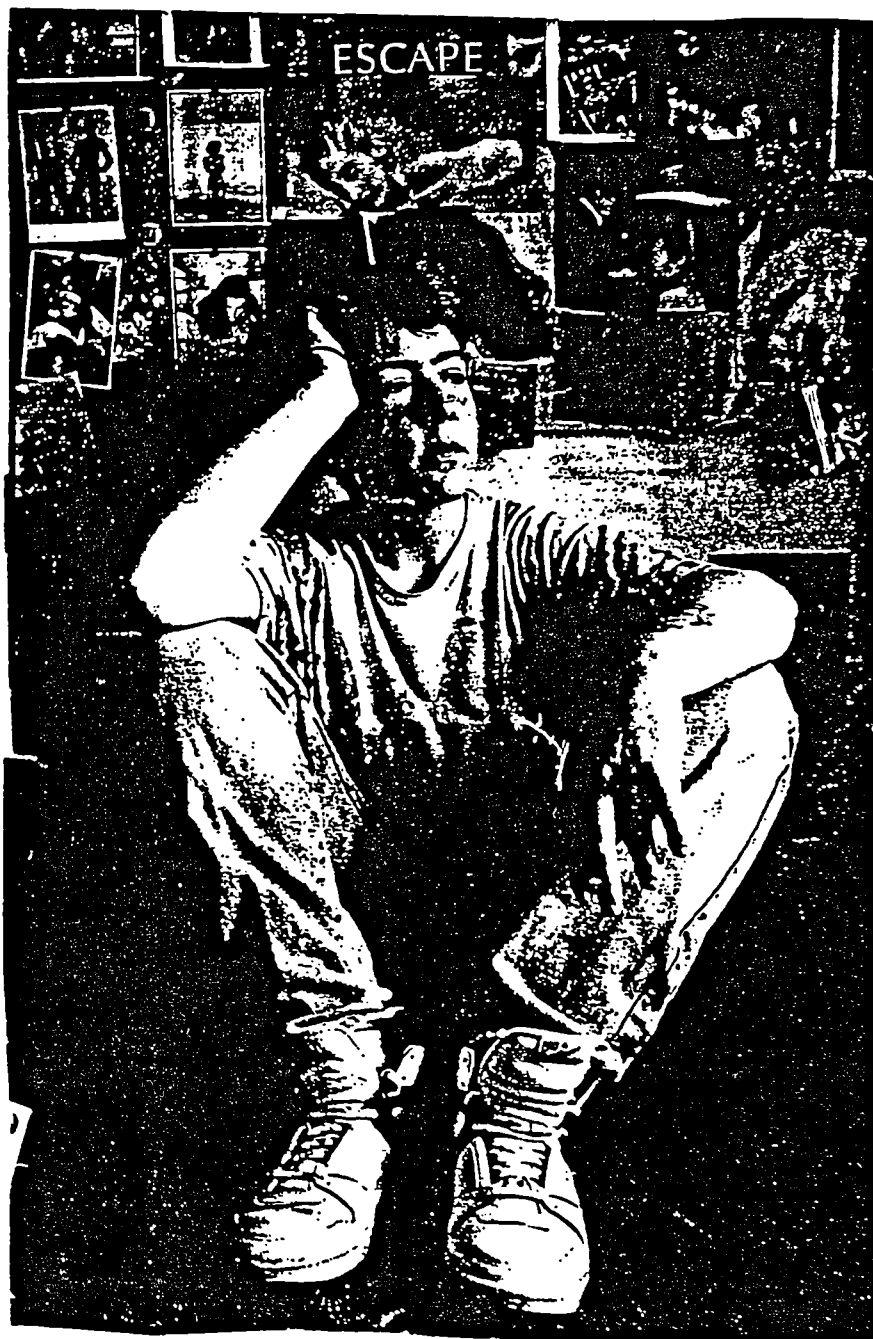
Are there any consumer goods that you would really want to buy?

How far do you feel that the things you buy, you do so from free choice or whether there are any other factors involved?





GARY



EMMA



and The Manhattan (Shaftsbury Square, Belfast) Photography Cliff Mason

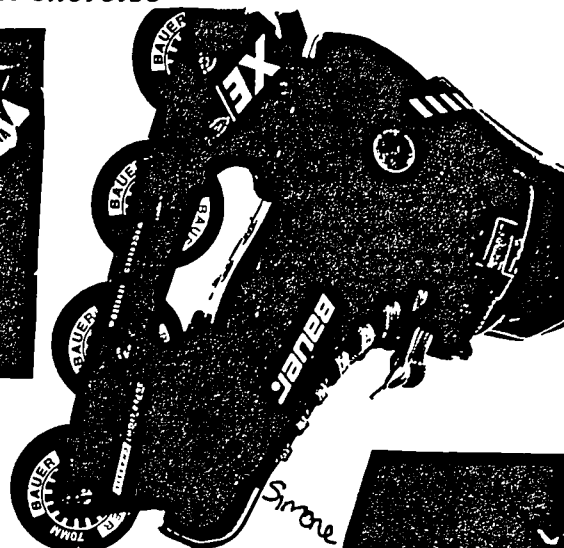
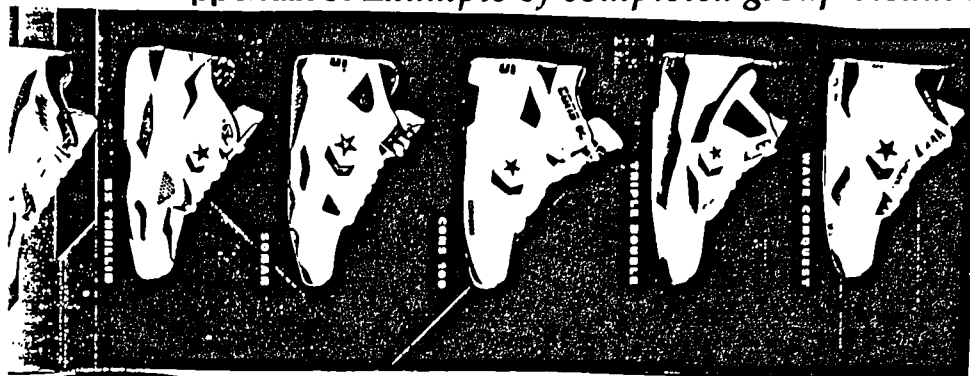
JACKIE



JAY

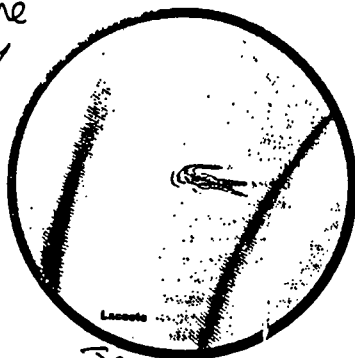
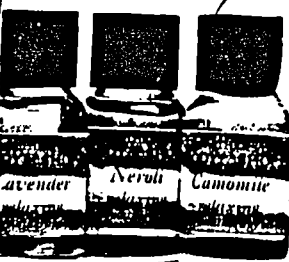


Appendix 5: Example of completed group visual exercise



Simone + Gary  
Jackie  
Simone  
Jay  
water  
recently followed by the  
names like Chloe and Ha  
ment of the Alfred Dunh

Emma + Jay



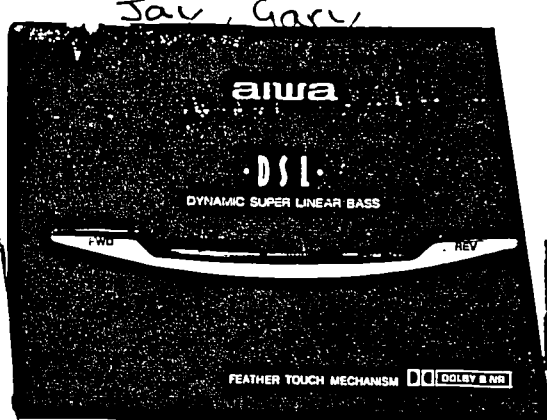
Jay



Simone  
Jay



Jackie



Jay, Gary



Jackie  
Jay, Gary

Jay  
Jackie



Simone  
Gary

Gary

Emma

124  
1251

Jackie  
Jay  
Gary  
Emma



ars.



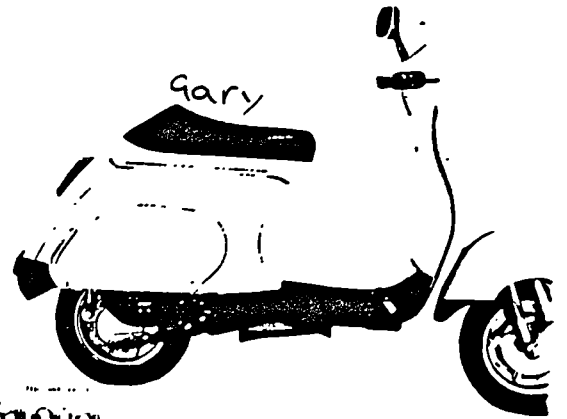


Jackie



Emma Day

# IT CAN ONLY BE Emma NEXT



Gary



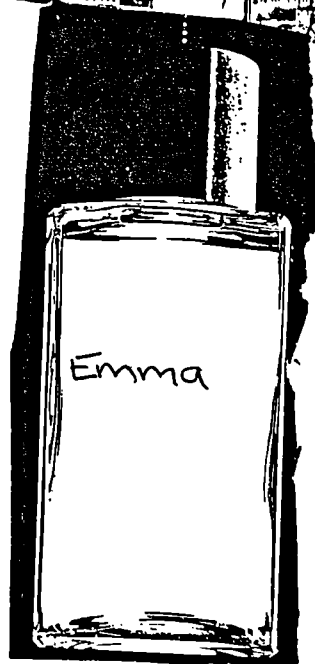
Gary

Emma

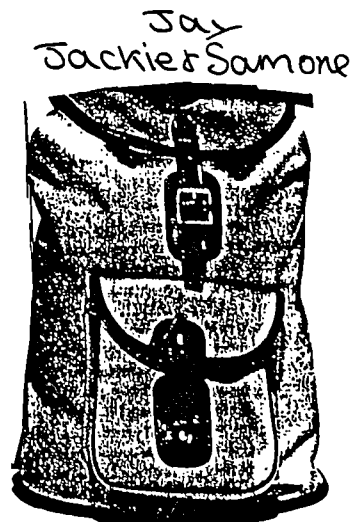


Gary & Jay

Simone  
Emma



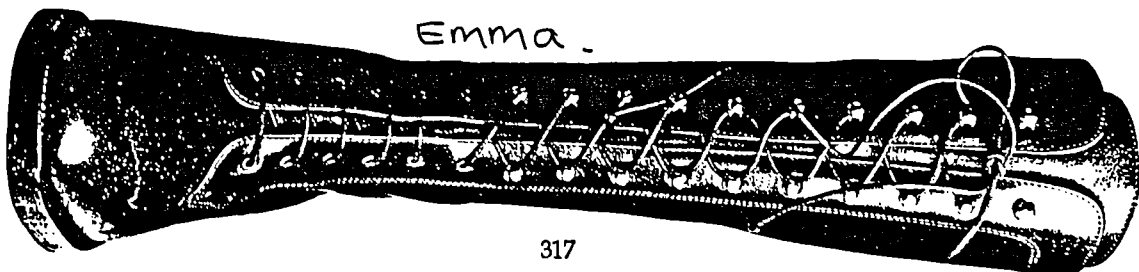
Emma



Jay  
Jackie & Simone



Emma + Jay



Emma

## Appendix 6

### *Instructions for completing repertory grids*

Bearing in mind the sorts of things we've been talking about over the last couple of weeks I want you to:-

1) Think about the following sorts of things:-

What sorts of things the people you know are into.  
Peoples images, the way they look etc.  
The things people like/dislike.  
The things people buy.  
The leisure activities they take part in.  
ANYTHING ELSE THAT SPRINGS TO MIND  
THAT SEEMS RELEVANT TO WHAT WE'VE  
WE'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT.

2) Then I will give you three titles of people you know.

eg. Your best mate, your neighbour and your tutor.

It is up to you to visualise these people in your minds and then to decide how 2 of those people are alike and thereby different from the third (in terms of the things mentioned above). For instance, you might say that your neighbour and your tutor like to listen to Val Doonican while your best mate doesn't. You would then write listens to Val Doonican in the left hand space.

I would then need to know how is the third person is different? You might put that your best mate listens to Indie music or whatever. This is what you would put in the far right space. But remember just because my example is about music doesn't mean you should also use it!

It is important while you are doing this not to copy what anybody else writes. Your responses need to be yours and yours only for them to be of any use.

Once you've done the first 2 boxes you're ready to move on to the next group of people. Work down the grid filling in the far left and right spaces as you go. If you get stuck refer back to the list of things we are interested in, above.



**Appendix 7: *Significant others (Elements)***

Mother, best non-college mate and yourself.

Tutor, best college mate and yourself.

Brother or sister, best non-college mate and yourself.

Best college mate, best non-college mate and yourself.

Tutor, mum and yourself.

Mum, tutor and brother or sister.

Best college mate, brother or sister and yourself.

Mum, neighbour and best college mate.

Brother or sister, yourself and tutor.

Neighbour, brother or sister and tutor.

MUM	TUTOR	BEST COLLEGE MATE	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE	BROTHER OR SISTER AGE: 20	NEIGHBOUR	SELF	
L	N	R	R	N	N	5	Shops at Gainsburgs.
L	L	R	R	R	R	4	Long hair
L	N	R	L	L	N	5	Shops at burtons.
L	L	L	R	L	<del>L</del>	5	Owens a Car
<del>R</del> R	R	<del>R</del> L	L	<del>L</del>	N	1	Works for quality <del>education</del> education
R	L	R	N	R	L	N	Owens an Italian Car
L	R	R	R	L	L	3?	I live next door to each other
R	L	L	R	L	L	5	Sad lack of dress sense
R	R	R	R	R	L	3	Dead

ii / 1 iv / L / 5 / R / iii



Completed Repertory Grid 2

		1 → S							
L	MUM	TUTOR	BEST COLLEGE MATE	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE	BROTHER OR SISTER	NEIGHBOUR	SELF	R	
	wears smart clothes	L	R	R	R	L	<del>2</del> 3	wears casual clothes	
	physically active	R	L	L	L	R	<del>2</del> 2	not very physically active	
	listens to						<del>2</del> 2	listens to Radio 2 type music	
	main stream music	R	L	L	L	R	3	buys fashion clothes	
	buys practical clothes mostly	L	R	R	R	L	2	doesn't go to nightclubs	
	goes to nightclubs	R	R	R	R	R	<del>5</del> 5	drinks other alcoholic drinks other than wine mostly	
	drinks wine mostly	L	R	R	R	R	1	doesn't swim regularly	
	swims regularly	R	R	L	L	R	3	eats sensible food	
	eats junk food	R	L	L	L	R	1	has a full-time job	
L	has a part-time job	R	L	L	L	R	3	doesn't wear glasses	
	wears glasses	L	L	L	R	R	3		

L	MUM	TUTOR	BEST COLLEGE MATE	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE	<del>BROTHER OR</del> SISTER AGE: 15	NEIGHBOUR	SELF	R
non-college mate w/ no driving	R		R	L	R		5	me + my mum are against
no driving sister	L	L	R	R	R	R	4	acceptable answer Brenda
sister who dancing and a hobby	L		R	R	L		5	no hobbies at all
non-college friend w/ no driving sister who	R	L	R	L	R		3	we go out any way and drive a great thing
tutor who likes	R	L	R	R	R		5	me + my mum are not
tutor who had learning music	R	L	R	R	R		5	sister + mum who milder than music
me + college mate like driving	L		L	L			1	my sister cannot drive
very keen on keeping things tidy	R	R	R	R	R		3	were as my mum and college mate are not so keen

	L							R						
	MUM	TUTOR	BEST COLLEGE MATE	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE	BROTHER OR SISTER	NEIGHBOUR	SELF	MUM	TUTOR	BEST COLLEGE MATE	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE	BROTHER OR SISTER	NEIGHBOUR	SELF
Dress for court	L	L	R	R	L	L	L	Dress for look						
(Saturday night)														
Go to local	L	-	R	R	-	L	<del>5</del>	Go into town						
Likes garden	L	-	-	R	-	L	5	Plays on magazine						
listens to 60's music	L			L	R		4	likes ambient dance						
Gives to water	R		R	L	-	R	3	Goes to pubs						
Likes the Beatles	L	-	-	R	R	L	3	Likes <del>the</del> the orb						
Likes sunny days	L		L	R	R	L	3	likes snow						
doesn't like spending money	L		R	L	R	L	4	likes spending money						
Gets up early	L		L	L		L	5	gets up late						
Doesn't work (now, no job)	R	R	L	R	L	L	<del>5</del>	works						

\*

Completed Repertory Grid 5

MUM	TUTOR	BEST COLLEGE MATE	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE	<del>BROTHER OR</del> SISTER AGE: 28	NEIGHBOUR	SELF	
L	R	R	L	R	L	R L	ME + BEST COLLEGE MATE
R	L	R	R	R	L	R 5	ME + BEST COLLEGE MATE
R	R	L	R	L	R	1	BEST NON-COLLEGE MATE
R	L	R	L	R	L	5	ME + BEST COLLEGE MATE
R	L	R	R	R	R	5.	ME + MY MUM
R	L	L	R	L	R	3	MUM
L	<del>B</del>	L	L	R	L	3	ME + MY SISTER
L		R	L	R	R	4	BEST COLLEGE MATE - MYSELF.
R	L	R	R	L	R	5 B	MYSELF.
R	L	L	L	R	L	5	BEST SISTER

MOTHER  
LISTENS TO FOSTER AND ALAN AND THE IRISH FOLK SONGS.

TUTOR  
HAS NO DRESS SENSE AT ALL, AND ISN'T NECESSARILY TIDY

SISTER  
WHERE SHORT SKIRTS WHEN GOING OUT & THE WEATHER IS RIGHT.

BEST  
DOES NOT LAUGH AT ANY-ONE ELSE NO-MATTER HOW FUNNY

TUTOR  
IS IN HEAVELY INTO POLITICS.

TUTOR  
HIGHLY INTELLIGENT OR SO IT APPEARS

BEST COLLEGE MATE +  
BUYS CLOTHES THAT WE BOTH LIKE (usually) BUT NOT THE SORT OF STUFF I WOULD WEAR

MUM +  
TENDS TO BUY THINGS FOR THE HOUSE INSTEAD OF CLOTHES / MAKE-UP

SISTER  
WOULD BOTH LOVE TO SPEND AN ENTIRE DAY IN A PUB (SISTER + ME (MUM + ALAN))

NEIGHBOUR  
BOTH ENJOY DRIVING

WE BOTH LIKE LOTS OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF MUSIC ESP. REGGAE.

WHERE'S WHAT WE TELL COMFORTABLE IN WEATHER FASHIONABLE OR NOT.

WOULDN'T BE CAUGHT DEAD WEARING ANY-THING ABOVE THE KNEE.

WE BOTH CRACK UP LAUGHING AT ANY-THING AND EVERYTHING FOR NO REASON - SOME-TIMES

MY MOTHER AND I ARE NOT.

NOT VERY INTELLIGENT BUT NOT THICK EITHER.

TENDS TO BUY THE SAME SORT OF CLOTHES AND SHE WEARS MINE. I CAN'T FIT INTO HER'S.

WOULD BUY CLOTHES INSTEAD OF ANY-THING AND MAGAZINES

WOULD PREFER TO BE OUT DANCING / SINGING RATHER THAN IN A PUB

DOESN'T LIKE BEING IN A CAR. FOR LONG DISTANCES.

### Research Interview 3: Self-characterisation sketch

Please can you hand this back to me at the Friday session. You can write it on this page. Don't worry it should only take 15 minutes or so to do. And it is very important to my research!!!!!!

"I want you to write a character sketch of yourself, just as if you were a principal actor in a play. Include some idea of the things you like, buy and do. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew you very intimately and very sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone ever really could know you. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "..... is..."

This guy is a very friendly person and is quite humorous. He enjoys socialising with other people and having a 'laugh'. He Definately likes going to the pub and getting slightly intoxicated. He is very keen on any sort of sport be especially football and golf - of which he is a member of a club for both. He thinks sport is very important to a person because it benefits people in so many ways he says that it improves your skills in working within a team and also working as an individual. Andy also likes shopping and wearing the things he buys on weekends 'out on the town' trying to impress the ladyys with his charan and humour. He likes listening to music but could do with out it doesn't play a major part in his life. Generally he is quite loud but likes his quiet moments alone, sometimes. He is a good bloke really.

### Research Interview 3: Self-characterisation sketch

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..... listens to indie music she likes going to concerts and generally going but to clubs or just the pub. She buys mainly clothes, records and magazines. She is quite hardworking ~~and~~ ~~at~~ college. She does not do much sport and isn't interested in watching sport either. She spends more money on going out than shopping. She likes meeting new people and having a laugh. She enjoys seeing and doing new things, going to new places / countries. She is very determined to do well and has definite ideas on what she would like to do in the future ie university and career. She is not an ~~extremely~~ ~~is~~ tidy person and does things spontaneously. ~~out~~ ~~thank~~ just on occasions.



### Research Interview 3: Self-characterisation sketch

Please can you hand this back to me at the Friday session. You can write it on this page. Don't worry it should only take 15 minutes or so to do. And it is very important to my research!!!!!!

"I want you to write a character sketch of yourself, just as if you were a principal actor in a play. Include some idea of the things you like, buy and do. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew you very intimately and very sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone ever really could know you. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "..... is..."

..... is an outgoing person. She always likes to be busy and enjoys being with people, although she is just as happy to be alone.

Some of the things she enjoys doing include going out for a mad night with friends and having a laugh.

She loves to buy new clothes and to go on holiday. She enjoys meeting new people and having a good chat. As well as shopping for clothes she enjoys buying presents for friends and family.

She is a fairly sporting person and her favourite sport is swimming.

She listens ~~from~~ <sup>to</sup> any kind of music from classical and jazz to chart stuff and more depending on her mood. She is very relaxed and tries not to <sup>327</sup> get too worried about anything.

### Research Interview 3: Self-characterisation sketch

Please can you hand this back to me at the Friday session. You can write it on this page. Don't worry it should only take 15 minutes or so to do. And it is very important to my research!!!!!!

"I want you to write a character sketch of yourself, just as if you were a principal actor in a play. Include some idea of the things you like, buy and do. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew you very intimately and very sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone ever really could know you. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "..... is..."

..... enjoys to go out on a night he is at the 5 days a week he likes to have a girl friend at all times he likes to buy clothes and enjoys listening to bad music eg Rave, Reggae music he has done a few things wrong in his life. He used to go out there. He likes to have a get drunk on a weekend he has taken drugs eg cannabis, speed, lsd, ~~xxx~~ X.T.C, but now has stopped except for cannabis. He likes to be smartly dressed and likes to be one of the lads he is good to get on with but some times is a bit touchy. And goes in moods when tired & bored.

### Research Interview 3: Self-characterisation sketch

Please can you hand this back to me at the Friday session. You can write it on this page. Don't worry it should only take 15 minutes or so to do. And it is very important to my research!!!!!!

"I want you to write a character sketch of yourself, just as if you were a principal actor in a play. Include some idea of the things you like, buy and do. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knew you very intimately and very sympathetically, perhaps better than anyone ever really could know you. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "..... is..."

..... is 17 years of age, soon to be 18.  
She is quiet at times but then very active at other times. She is fun to be with and caring to others.  
Her main interests are spending a lot of her time at the church she attends, learning the Italian language, meeting with friends, ~~the~~ cooking, looking after her younger sisters and driving. She is very good with money when both saving and spending it. She can be very generous especially when buying presents or helping someone out.  
Caroline cares a lot for her family, especially her mum and sister Joana.  
Her dress is usually casual but for occasions she can look very smart!  
Caroline can not wait to finish college -

## **Appendix 10: Pilot Consumer Meanings Questionnaire**

Think back over the last few weeks. Try and identify in your mind the item you purchased that gave you the most pleasure during that period. This could include anything other than food!!! Write down the item concerned in the space provided and then fill in the grid below and answer the questions that follow.

### **ITEM PURCHASED**

How important were the following factors in influencing your decision to purchase the above item? Please rank 1 to 10 (1 the most important factor to 10 the least important factor) Leave out factors that don't seem relevant.

Good value

Fashionable

Friends influence

Reputation of the brand

The shop you bought it from

(Shop: )

Expensive well-renowned make

Cheap

Gives you confidence

Advertising

Expresses your individuality

Did you take a long time to decide to purchase this item? What will you be using it for?

Were you with anybody else when you purchased this item? Did they influence you in any way?

What is it specifically about this item that gives you pleasure?

How, if at all, do you see this item contributing to your identity?

## Appendix 11: Examples of completed final Consumer Meanings Questionnaire

Think back over the last few weeks. Try and identify in your mind the item you purchased that gave you the most pleasure during that period. This could include anything other than food!!! Fill in the details about the item you purchased in the spaces provided and then fill in the grid below and answer the questions that follow. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

Item: <u>CD</u>	Shop: <u>HMV</u>
Cost: <u>£9.99</u>	Planned Buy / <del>Impulsive Buy (Delete)</del> Male / Female (Delete)

How important were the following factors in influencing your decision to purchase the above item? Please rate 1 to 10 (from 1 unimportant to 10 very important).

	UNIMPORTANT	>	VERY IMPORTANT
The image of the shop concerned	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
How fashionable the item is	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Advertising	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The confidence the item gives you	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The "street cred" of the name	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Value for money	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Friends opinions	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
The item expresses your individuality	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Reputation of the brand for quality	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Factors other than the above	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
1)	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2)	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3)	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4)	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5)	1	2	3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do your friends own similar items? YES/NO (delete as appropriate)

If so, in what ways, if at all, did this influence your purchase?

My friends do own similar items but they ~~do~~ would not really influence whether or not I actually did buy a CD. Maybe if one of my friends had recommended the CD and said that it was really good, it may persuade me to go out and buy it, but on the whole I know what music I like and make my own mind up about what I will buy.

What is it specifically about this item that gives you pleasure?

I get pleasure out of listening to music, because I am very interested in music and it can change your mood, it can make you feel relaxed, happy etc. I feel that music is a good way of communicating your feelings and frustrations with others and I can relate to the music I listen to.

What do you think this item says about you as a person?

I think that the CD I bought shows that I am an individual personality and that I am a keen fan of good music.

Thank you for your help!

## CONSUMER MEANINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

Think back over the last few weeks. Try and identify in your mind the item you purchased that gave you the most pleasure during that period. This could include anything other than food!!! Fill in the details about the item you purchased in the spaces provided and then fill in the grid below and answer the questions that follow. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

Item: <u>Addidas 3 track old sports</u>	Shop: <u>Afflecks Palace, Manchester</u>
Cost: <u>£20.00</u>	Planned Buy / <del>Impulse Buy</del> (Delete)

How important were the following factors in influencing your decision to purchase the above item? Please rate 1 to 10 (from 1 unimportant to 10 very important).

UNIMPORTANT                      >                      VERY IMPORTANT

The image of the shop concerned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
How fashionable the item is	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Advertsing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The confidence the item gives you	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The "street cred" of the name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Friends opinions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The item expresses your individuality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reputation of the brand for quality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Factors other than the above	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Do your friends own similar items?                      YES/No (delete as appropriate)

If so, in what ways, if at all, did this influence your purchase?

IT DID NOT.

What is it specifically about this item that gives you pleasure?

The old style of the Jacket and my favorite colour combination (blue + white).

What do you think this item says about you as a person?

IT shows that I have confidence in wearing what I want.

Thank you for your help!

## CONSUMER MEANINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

Think back over the last few weeks. Try and identify in your mind the item you purchased that gave you the most pleasure during that period. This could include anything other than food!!! Fill in the details about the item you purchased in the spaces provided and then fill in the grid below and answer the questions that follow. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

Item: <u>Skirt</u>	Shop: <u>Jigsaw</u>
Cost: <u>£16.99</u>	<del>Planned Buy</del> / Impulse Buy (Delete)

How important were the following factors in influencing your decision to purchase the above item?  
Please rate 1 to 10 (from 1 unimportant to 10 very important).

UNIMPORTANT                      >                      VERY IMPORTANT

The image of the shop concerned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
How fashionable the item is	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Advertsing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The confidence the item gives you	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The "street cred" of the name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Value for money	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Friends opinions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The item expresses your individuality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reputation of the brand for quality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Factors other than the above	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1) <u>Sex appeal</u>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Do your friends own similar items?                      YES/~~NO~~ (delete as appropriate)

If so, in what ways, if at all, did this influence your purchase?

This did not have a consence influence on my choice of item. Admittedly my friends sometimes buy similar items although as ~~me~~ I find I am friends with these people as we have similar interests and opinions on matters we occassionally find we also share the same taste in clothes

What is it specifically about this item that gives you pleasure?

This item of clothing was bought specifically for going to discos. It therefore gives me confidence. ~~and~~

What do you think this item says about you as a person?

I think it tells people that I am young + slightly carefree.

Thank you for your help!

## CONSUMER MEANINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

Think back over the last few weeks. Try and identify in your mind the item you purchased that gave you the most pleasure during that period. This could include anything other than food!!! Fill in the details about the item you purchased in the spaces provided and then fill in the grid below and answer the questions that follow. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

Item: <u>Top</u>	Shop: <del>Intentional</del> <u>Top Shop</u>
Cost: <u>£15</u>	<del>Planned Buy</del> / Impulse Buy (Delete)

How important were the following factors in influencing your decision to purchase the above item?  
Please rate 1 to 10 (from 1 unimportant to 10 very important).

UNIMPORTANT                      >                      VERY IMPORTANT

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The image of the shop concerned				④						
How fashionable the item is								⑧		
Advertising							⑦			
The confidence the item gives you								8	⑨	
The "street cred" of the name					⑤					
Value for money								⑧		
Friends opinions								⑧		
The item expresses your individuality									⑨	
Reputation of the brand for quality							⑦			
Factors other than the above										
1) <u>Sex appeal</u>									⑨	
2)										
3)										
4)										
5)										

Do your friends own similar items? ~~YES~~ NO (delete as appropriate)

If so, in what ways, if at all, did this influence your purchase?

I like to be original, so this was not very influential. As we are french however we have similar interests and likes/dislikes.

What is it specifically about this item that gives you pleasure?

Makes me feel and look good (! hope!)

What do you think this item says about you as a person?

It says I'm fashionable and I care about my appearance, I feel confident about myself.

Thank you for your help!



## CONSUMER MEANINGS QUESTIONNAIRE

Think back over the last few weeks. Try and identify in your mind the item you purchased that gave you the most pleasure during that period. This could include anything other than food!!! Fill in the details about the item you purchased in the spaces provided and then fill in the grid below and answer the questions that follow. All your answers will be treated confidentially.

Item: T-shirt / Top	Shop: Virginia Galleries - Biba Lane
Cost: £19.99	<del>Planned Buy</del> / Impulse Buy (Delete) Male / Female (Delete)

How important were the following factors in influencing your decision to purchase the above item?  
Please rate 1 to 10 (from 1 unimportant to 10 very important).

	UNIMPORTANT	>	VERY IMPORTANT
The image of the shop concerned	①		10
How fashionable the item is	1		10
Advertising	1		10
The confidence the item gives you	1		10
The "street cred" of the name	①		10
Value for money	1		10
Friends opinions	1		10
The item expresses your individuality	1		10
Reputation of the brand for quality	1		10
Factors other than the above			
1) Colour	1		10
2)	1		10
3)	1		10
4)	1		10
5)	1		10

Do your friends own similar items? ~~Yes~~ / NO (delete as appropriate)

If so, in what ways, if at all, did this influence your purchase?

What is it specifically about this item that gives you pleasure?

I like the kind of bright coloured tops that are about in shops just now. The top I bought was red with a logo/ writing on the front and I like the way it looks. Also, the item is fairly fashionable just now so it makes me feel good to wear it.

What do you think this item says about you as a person?

I hope it says that I'm quite fashionable! Other than that the item is basically the sort of fashion I go for, I like indie music and hate dance music, so I hope this kind of shows in the clothes I wear.

Thank you for your help!