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YOUTH AND SPORTS CONSUMPTION

by

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Using ethnography, this study focused on a series of conversations with 47 young people from different social and geographical locations in an attempt to gain greater insight into how the consumption of sport and sport-related commodities are enmeshed in young men and women's struggle toward identity formation. From this exploration, there were three fundamental and inter-penetrating themes that emerged. First, the participants validated their sports consumption habits by describing the functional attributes of the commodities they consumed, namely comfort, quality and look. This served to defend against inferences suggesting that they may be conformists mindlessly shopping according to the social seduction of the sign. Second, choice within the sphere of sports consumption was repeatedly cited as a moment of empowerment and individuality whereby the participants, anxious to characterize themselves as rational and autonomously consuming individuals, were comfortable articulating and demonstrating their own creativity and character. Finally, the Other was essential to the self: in the process of presenting one's own identity or the identity of a group in and through sports commodities, boundaries were established and re-established by way of a ceaselessly evolving depiction of the Other. In conclusion, for the young people involved in this study, sport and its related commodities play a crucial role in the complexities of peer relations and the ever-evolving process of identification and identity formation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Jackson and Holbrook (1995) conceptualize shopping rituals as a “social process” that illuminates how “identities are constructed and negotiated in place through complex social relations of class, ethnicity, gender and generation” (pp. 1913-1914). Bordo (1991) argues that each of these social categories is acted upon differently in the processes of consumption, specifically with regards to fashion consumption. She comments that the discursive content of fashion sufficiently blurs social reality such that its sexist and racist presuppositions are rendered invisible. Women fail to recognize the social significance of some of the fashionable practices in which they engage. Within the consciousness of the consumer, fashion comes to be an entity in and of itself, distinguishable from the social context and antecedents out of which the particular fashion has emerged. Bartky (1988) believes the seduction of fashion to be so powerful that she refers to it as a “style of flesh” (p. 78), whereby, fashion becomes the life world through which the consumer relates to, and understands, their surroundings. With regards to sports fashion Cole and Hribar (1995) suggest that the Nike slogan “Just do it!” authorizes women to take control of their lives. However, the slogan falsely suggests that responsibility for oneself rests solely with the individual, thus effacing the historical and social barriers that prevent all women from achieving universal empowerment.

An extensive debate surrounds consumption in general, and sport consumption in particular. Indeed, there are various viewpoints and different conceptions with regards to

the power or domination that shopping practices offer the individual. Langman (1992) speaks of the “dialectical of empowerment and enfeeblement” (p. 41) wherein consumers celebrate the superficial affirmation achieved through shopping while unconsciously subjecting themselves to the rigor of continuous consumption patterns. Shoppers come to need the validation received through consumption often, turning to commodities to reinvigorate their identity.

Some authors (Baudrillard, 1988; Langman, 1992; Nava, 1987) suggest that ignorance of the most latent tenets of consumption threatens an individual with being labeled as eccentric. Nava (1987) contends that consumerism is an “ever-expanding discursive apparatus” (p. 206) that shapes our emotions, experiences and social reality. Although an individual may be able to express resistive moments, complete abandonment of consumer discourse would render that individual socially deviant.

Using a Foucauldian framework, Hargreaves (1986) theorizes that one of the main thrusts of consumer culture is wielded at and through the body. Foucault’s concept of panopticism is implemented by Hargreaves in his statement that consumer discourse acts on the body to produce the normal person by “making each [person] as visible as possible to the other, and by meticulous work on persons’ bodies—at the instigation of the subjects themselves” (p. 135). Here, Hargreaves suggests that through the voluntary activity of consumption the consumer is incessantly exposed to a cultural framework that facilitates familiarizing the consumer with a version of ‘reality’ that is consistent with consumer discourse. More specifically, the body, in all of its manifestations, is understood in comparison with the typifications circulated in and through the rhetoric of consumption.

Sport, with its preoccupation with the body, is readily appropriated by consumer culture. Because the sporting body “is always in the process of becoming” (Cole, 1993, p. 87), consumer culture logic is able to enmesh itself with the perpetually incomplete body thereby creating anxieties within the individual (Featherstone, 1983, 1991). Commodities are then sold to the consumer and thus supposedly resolves the socially-created bodily concerns. However, absolute resolution is not in the interest of producers, otherwise consumption would cease (Featherstone, 1983, 1991).

Fischer and Gainer (1994), in their study on how the consumption of organized sports works to establish and perpetuate notions of masculinity and femininity, conclude that consumption is a gendered activity. The finding that consumption, and more specifically sports consumption, is differentially approached by female and male respondents is supported by other studies (Lee & Browne, 1995; Slater, Rouner, Domenech-Rodriguez, Beauvais, Murphy & Van Leuven, 1997). Many authors (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995; Miles, 1996) have suggested that consumption is a component of broader social forces which both informs and is informed by the cultural environment in which it operates. Social dynamics were found to be significant variables in a study conducted by Wilson and Sparks (1996) who attempted to demonstrate how the racial make-up of particular geographical locales influenced how young people decoded advertisements featuring black athletes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the theoretically rich literature on consumption (e.g., Baudrillard, 1988; Featherstone, 1991), there are relatively few empirically-based studies that try to contextually comprehend the experience of the individual consumer (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995; Miles, 1996). Jackson and Holbrook (1995) suggest that previous accounts of consumption patterns “are characterized by an all-pervasive political pessimism towards modern consumerism...[where] consumers are stripped of their human agency, becoming mere pawns in the hands of faceless ‘hidden persuaders’” (p. 1914). The authors continue by arguing that intellectual theoretical accounts often replace the lived experiences of the consumer.

The present investigation intends to complement the knowledge of consumption of sports commodities amongst youths. More specifically, the study will attempt to gain insight into the following issues: (a) how massified symbols found within the theatre of consumption are embraced and manipulated by communities of young men and women to formulate localized meanings within their everyday lives; (b) how young men and women negotiate the various debilitating obstacles that are necessarily a part of the consumption experience to present themselves as empowered, autonomous individuals; (c) how gender, race and ethnicity are variously expressed within the field of consumption to create a diversity of meanings in the processes of identity formation and identification.

Methodology

In an attempt to gain a more in-depth understanding of the relations that exist between youth and sports commodities in the process of identity formation, this study employed the theoretical framework of cultural studies along with the methodological dictates of ethnomethodology. Cultural studies is compatible with this study because it emphasizes the merit of everyday life as a system of cultural practices and mental formations worthy of intellectual inquiry. Furthermore, cultural studies, with its interdisciplinary standpoint, is welcoming of a variety of methodological forms without displaying the type of academic pretentiousness that so often stagnate the investigative creativity in other disciplines.

The conceptual underpinnings of ethnomethodology seem particularly pertinent to this study due to the substantial role this methodology accords to common sense understandings and mundane elements of everyday life. In this regard, ethnomethodology borrows much of its theoretical grounding from phenomenological philosophy (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Rogers, 1983; Turner, 1986). Concepts such as “common sense” understandings of the world, indexicality and reflexivity will be beneficial in illuminating how sports commodities circulate through the social environments of youth.

The participants involved in this study were males (n=22) and females (n=25) from Winnipeg, Manitoba as well as two Ontario cities: Kenora and Toronto. In order to approximate the complex social nature of the consumption experience, the respondents were of a mixed ethnicity and race. The study was concerned with a broad range of responses as to how individuals interact with sports commodities. Therefore, the

participants were *not* limited to those who actively consume sports products. Rather, it was felt that a variety of reactions would be just as instructive as positive responses.

In small groups of four to eight participants, the researcher guided the respondents in discussing a broad range of issues relating to the consumption of sports commodities. It was felt that the consumption experience is social in nature, therefore it seemed appropriate that topics be handled in a social situation. A prepared list of open-ended questions was brought into the discussion groups to instigate and propel the conversation with regards to sports consumption and identity formation.

All of the discussion sessions were audio-taped field notes were taken by the researcher. The taped sessions were transcribed and the transcriptions were submitted to a content analysis.

Significance of the Study

Many theoretical accounts have elaborated on the impact of consumption on lives of the individuals. However, there have been relatively few studies that have provided empirical evidence as to contextualized experience of how the individuals relate to the commodities they consume. This thesis intends to fill the gap that exists between theoretical accounts and the everyday lived experiences of the consumers.

Within the academic community, this research will help in progressing the understanding of youth consumption, especially as it relates to sports commodities. The methodological format chosen for this study constitutes a unique contribution in that it is flexible in nature, and it therefore allowed the issues to emerge from the life world of the

youth, as opposed to set answers resulting from a restricted research agenda imposed by the researcher. The rather loosely-structured format encouraged spontaneous and thoughtful answers, which will hopefully further our understandings of youth and sports consumption.

Delimitations and Limitations

The study is delimited in two conspicuous ways. First, the discussion sessions ranged in length from 40 minutes to just over an hour. Longer, more thorough sessions would have complemented the study. Second, the only instrument of recording was audio-cassettes. Some of the intricacies of the conversations were lost because of a lack of visual recording and because of simultaneous nature of the participants' conversations.

In terms of additional limitations, it should be mentioned that with all of the respondents being from particular geographic locations—Toronto, Kenora and Winnipeg—it is possible that the issues they perceive to be significant are not transferable to youth in other locations (although generalizability was not the goal of this research). Furthermore, the distance between the discussion groups prevented easily accessible follow-up interviews. For the most part, the initial interview was the final interview. Finally, it was difficult to mix members from the various ethnic, racial and geographic communities due to geographic distance.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter briefly navigates through the vast literature related to youth and sport consumption to highlight some of the important theoretical and empirical findings that bring further understanding to this phenomenon. Little research has been conducted so far on the issue of youth and sport consumption itself, but a good number of studies have addressed the larger issues of consumption and popular culture. This chapter is thus divided into seven inter-related sections that discuss studies linked either generally or specifically to the thesis' topic. The first section introduces and elaborates on the notion of consumer culture. The following section summarizes the agency-structure debate that surrounds consumption. The third section presents some feminist perspectives used to theorize on the ways in which consumption influences and informs the experiences of women. Using a Foucauldian framework, consumption is analyzed in its relationship with the body in the fourth section. In the fifth section, the existing literature that addresses race and its inter-relations with sport consumption is considered. The sixth section considers the relationship between sport and consumer culture. Finally, the existing literature pertaining to youth consumption of all sorts is reviewed

Consumer Culture

As a sub-section of material culture, which is concerned with the “person thing relationship” (Lury, 1996, p. 1), consumer culture is an encompassing definition, which refers to the particular form that contemporary consumption has assumed. Specifically, consumer culture refers to the practices of consumption in a field of rapidly expanding commodities and the effects these have on the experiences of everyday life (Featherstone, 1983). Consumption is understood, in the context of this essay, as more than simple “purchase and economic exchange” (Shields, 1992, p. 11). Rather, consumption is “elaborated by practices of browsing, looking, consuming the environment of various purpose-built ‘consumption spaces’” (p. 11). What comes to be classified as consumption in the preceding definition includes both activities that are of a utilitarian purpose (e.g. grocery shopping) and all sorts of playful activities such as socializing and gazing. Furthermore, the distinction between play and utilitarian forms of consumption have become increasingly blurred and it is no longer possible to label any one aspect of consumption with the precision of a binary categorization. Lehtonen (1993) recognizes this in commenting that “shopping is something done for its own sake; its popularity as an activity cannot be explained by showing that it is a means to some specific, functional ends” (p. 1).

Featherstone (1983) presents the notion that a culture of consumption is fed by the constant proliferation of images and signs such that the consumer process is never complete. Instead, he argues that the “good life,” which is seemingly extended to the individual through his or her purchasing power, is elusive and forever evolving. Through

constructed representations of the virtues of consumption, individuals are asked to compare their “mundane, prosaic, over-routinized lives” with the “over-optionized lives celebrated in consumer culture” (p. 6). As long as there is a captive and aesthetic-oriented audience, mass production can continue to saturate the market with a plethora of commodities that are presented as objects supposedly able to satisfy the needs and desires of the consumer. The cycle of consumption is further perpetuated and accelerated in that “commodities voraciously demand other commodities” (Featherstone, 1991b, p. 173) in order to maintain, complement and complete the assemblage of products already purchased.

A fundamental capitalist paradox emerged as technological advancements in production began to exceed the rate of product re-purchase. Harvey (1990) chronicles the economic, political and social antecedents that necessitated the transition from a Fordist method of production to the flexible and specialized systems associated with postmodernist production. The “accelerating turnover time in production” in post-Fordism was “useless unless the turnover time in consumption was also reduced”(Harvey, 1990, p. 156). Various methods have been implemented in order to escalate the purchasing cycle, including marketing the commodity in terms of its aesthetic value (Haug, 1986). By shifting the emphasis and prestige of the commodity from its use-value to the brand-name, an “aesthetic monopoly” (p. 41) is created in that the material quality of the product is replaced with the success of its image. The aesthetic commodity ensures a high turn-over by channeling the desires, fantasies and anxieties of the individual into consumption of the new look product. Once the aesthetic of the commodity comes to exceed its use-value, a cycle of consumption is established where

continually changing fashions necessitate never-ending patterns of consumption in order for the fashion conscious individual to remain in style. Harvey illustrates how the transition to an economy of “flexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side...by a much greater attention to quick-changing fashions and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies” (p. 156).

The constant deferral of pleasure on to the latest time-saving, youth-enhancing, muscle-building commodity results in a displaced consumer, attentively monitoring the shops for the next product that is going to set him or her apart from the Other. Baudrillard (1988) advises us to “acknowledge that a need is not a need for a particular object as much as it is a ‘need’ for difference (the desire for social meaning)” (p. 45). However, many of the commodities that flood the market are mass-produced and available to a large variety of people. Therefore, achieving distinctiveness through the mass produced commodity may seem paradoxical. Baudrillard argues that the individual does not look horizontally at the multitude of others identifying with the same item, but rather he or she looks vertically, drawing his or her difference from the model, image or symbol that epitomizes the uniqueness he or she wishes to embody. Furthermore, it is not the solitary product that differentiates the individual from the Other, but rather the lifestyle, or the “particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearances and bodily dispositions they design together” (Featherstone, 1991a, p. 86).

The individual consumer is encouraged to break from the rationality of ascetic values and experiment with a creative expression of lifestyle through consumption (Lury, 1996). Nixon (1992) illustrates this by noting that the diversification of fashion goods has

created a broader look of masculinity through the mixing of signifiers in unconventional ways. The re-formulated masculine look that is inserted into consumer discourse is a balance between the tenderness associated with youth and femininity, and the toughness associated with masculinity. However, some authors (Baudrillard, 1988; Featherstone, 1991a) warn that the various styles the individual implements into his or her ensemble of goods must observe the limitations of social norms, otherwise the individual runs the risk of becoming socially ostracized. Nixon complements this argument in noting that the ensemble of signifiers is consumed as a package or a total look and that any one aspect of the package carried to extremes could potentially result in negative social evaluations. Therefore, the blurring of the masculine-feminine boundary through expressive consumption is limited by the prescriptions of the “total look,” thus preventing the disruption of the balance between soft and hard, which arguably could result in the further entrenchment of traditional conceptions of masculinity.

Marketers are aware that shopping continues to be a predominantly female activity (Lunt & Livingstone, 1992; Nixon, 1992; Prus & Dawson, 1991), recognizing the male absence from certain types of consumption as a vast untapped pool of revenue. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, marketing interests are attempting to lodge the male body into the cycle of consumer discourse by encouraging novel expressions of masculinity that beg for expanded consumption practices. Bonner and duGay (1992) demonstrate how the popular television series “thirtysomething” portrayed a softer, more feminine version of the male characters that were more likely to engage in consumer practices. This served the dual purpose of planting the notion that leisurely consumption is acceptable for men and that the stereotypical conception of masculinity has evolved

into a more multi-faceted identity. Similarly, Jackson (1991) suggests that the shift towards softer definitions of masculinity can be witnessed in Gentlemen's Quarterly and Esquire magazines. He continues in noting that "the target market is quite specific: upwardly-mobile young male executives who have significant disposable income to spend on clothing, cosmetics and the other fashion accessories" (p. 56). Therefore, the circulation of broadened conceptions of masculinity within consumer rhetoric colonizes the consciousness of male consumers, thus creating a new niche for the sale of commodities.

Langman (1992) likens the atmosphere of shopping malls to "carnivals of consumption" (p. 42) in her rather pessimistic account of consumer culture. The carnivalesque of consumption offers opportunities for the commonplace to be transgressed into a "series of mass-mediated fragmented spectacles" (Langman, 1992, p. 47). In such an atmosphere, consumers are able to playfully experience liminality as they invert social norms and imagine themselves in exotic circumstances. hooks (1997) argues that it is possible for the consumer to encounter the "radical" without undergoing a fundamental re-alignment of his or her everyday conservative disposition.

Rogin (1990) theorizes how this transcendental experimentation is possible by linking the concepts of amnesia and spectacle. He refers to amnesia as a "motivated forgetting...[or] a cultural impulse both to have the experience and not to retain it in memory" (p. 105). Rogin then borrows Debord's (1994) conceptualization of the spectacle. For Debord, the spectacle is a "world view transformed into an objective force" (p. 13) that "serves as a total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system" (p.13). It plays with culturally held myths and utopian fantasies in the

process of forming a binding “social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (p. 12). By combining the notion of amnesia with Debord’s concept of the spectacle, Rogin envisions the latter as a platform by which forbidden pleasures can appear, disappear and later reappear without ever truly surfacing in the consciousness of the individual. It is the appearance of total perceptibility that complicates the detection and conscious deliberation of the ideological nature of the commodity.

Shopping: Domination or Emancipation?

The structure-agency debate remains a critical controversy amongst scholars investigating consumer patterns. Traditionally, theoretical paradigms have constructed the consumer either as a rationally functioning individual or as a mindless dupe responding powerlessly to the marketing schemes of various industries. These polarized constructions of the consumer have increasingly come under scrutiny and are being replaced with what Jackson and Holbrook (1995) refer to as a more “nuanced picture” (p. 1928). Shopping is not simply a “momentary act of purchase” but rather a complex “social process” which offers insight into how our “identities are constructed and negotiated in place through complex social relations of class, ethnicity, gender and generation” (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995, pp. 1913-1914). The authors reject conventional dichotomous notions of the shopping experience (such as male-female, young-old, black-white) and suggest that consumers are able to experience a “plurality of identities” (p. 1914), wherein the distinction between traditional signifiers blur and the consumer is able

to playfully experiment with the formation of many, sometimes contradicting, constructions of the self.

The packaging and marketing of this multiplicity of images result in a concurrent fragmentation of one's self identity where the self is less associated with the interior and becomes "exteriorized" (Rail, 1998, p. 147). The instability inherent within the commodified identity of consumer culture results in what Langman calls the "corpse of decentred selfhood" (p. 62), where the consumer has come to rely on shopping rituals as a source of "recognition and empowerment" (p. 66). Therefore, it is argued that the virtuous internal characteristics of the self have been supplanted with an exteriorized version of self that is constantly in need of recognition according to the flux of the fashion-oriented gaze of the Other.

Langman (1992) speaks of a "dialectical of empowerment and enfeeblement" (p. 43) where the consumer is simultaneously permitted to rejoice in feelings of control and autonomy while participating in the perpetuation of the system that oppresses him or her. Consuming practices seem to present the consumer with an infinite selection of possible identities, when in reality these superficial lifestyles require constant refinement and "maintenance" (Featherstone, 1991b, p. 182) in mandatory rituals of comparison with the Other. It is this feature of consumer culture that leads Langman to conclude that the numerous identities available through consumption have resulted in a "fragmented selfhood" (p. 69) ultimately leading to a more enfeebled consumer who voraciously attempts to reaffirm his or her self through shopping practices.

Borrowing from Foucault's work, Nava's arguments are echoed by others (Bordo, 1991; Cole, 1995) in recognizing that the apparent subversive potential offered through

the diversity of consumption practices is in fact a point of susceptibility to dominant ideologies. The multiplicity of points from which consumption emanates is the technique by which resistant tendencies are available to dominant reappropriation, thereby diffusing their subversive possibilities. Langman (1992) remarks that it is the “changing nature of hegemony that allows—if not requires—contestation” (p. 42) provided the disruptions do not necessitate a radical re-working of dominant ideological structures. In this sense, resistive tendencies are a welcomed aspect of capitalist society in that they provide creative content to accommodate the continuously evolving nature of consumer culture. Perpetual challenging of social boundaries is packaged into commodified forms that simultaneously make good marketing sense and work to neutralize the subversive sentiments that were originally associated with the rebellious moment. Ewen (1976) acknowledges this recuperative marketing tendency and comments that,

Appropriating the lingo and styles of the New Left, the counterculture, feminism, neo-agrarianism, ethnicity, drug-vision and other phenomena, the advertising industry, seeking markets, has generated a mass culture which reflects the spirit but not the cutting edge of resistance. (p. 218)

An example of this is illustrated by Budgeon and Currie (1995) who demonstrate how Seventeen, a popular female adolescent oriented magazine, appropriates the rhetoric of the liberal feminist movement in order to normalize notions of feminine and masculine gender distinctions. In their content analysis, the authors conclude that the magazine manages to re-channel the sentiments of feminism by contextualizing politically charged

feminist issues amongst conventional discourses of heterosexual femininity. The authors argue that such a framing of the issues relevant to women sensitizes the readers to a postfeminist structure of analysis. Postfeminism, for the purposes of this essay, is understood in terms of three mutually elaborative reactions to movement feminism. First, postfeminism posits that the feminist movement has achieved equality for women, and further emancipation actions are no longer necessary. Cole and Hribar (1996) comment that regardless of postfeminists assumption that the women's movement is no longer required, postfeminism continues to "accrue their meaning and force" (p. 356) through the borrowing, neutralizing and re-articulation of the major issues of relevance within the feminist movement. Second, with regards to postfeminist consumer discourse "potential antagonisms between feminism and consumption" are restructured such that the feminist agenda comes to be understood as "desires and identities that are accomplished through consumption" (p. 356). Thirdly, postfeminist rhetoric, coupled with the prevailing logic of neo-traditionalist values, accuses movement feminism as the culprit in the deterioration of the "traditional family values" (Cole & Hribar, 1996, p. 356).

Bordo (1991) suggests that it is the inability of resistive individuals or groups to define the subversive nature of their practices in the face of dominant interpretations that limits the rebellious potential. Attempts at defiance, which are re-integrated into dominant ideologies, result in the further entrenchment of feelings of marginality and powerlessness.

From the perspective of the individual reader of a material good, Nava (1987) argues that the meanings the interpreter derives from a mediated instance are relative and cannot be predictively constructed by the creator of the message. Similarly, Jackson and

Holbrook (1995) note that the comprehension of a phenomenon is dependent upon the “complex social relations of class and ethnicity, gender and generation” (p. 1913) which impact the particular social perspectives of the individual.

Contrarily, the encoding-decoding model of interpretation employed by Hall (1980) is accused by some critics of ignoring the “actual beings living in a material world” (Brunt, 1992, p. 69). Hall concluded that messages inscribed within texts are most typically read as a compromise between the intended meaning and the meanings derived by the audience. Brunt suggests that the concepts of “preferred readings” and audience “responses”, upon which the encoding-decoding model of textual analysis is based, are inadequate tools of inquiry. By comparing the “preferred readings” of the text (as determined by the authors of the investigation) against the interpretations of the audience, a “circuit” is established whereby the text occupies the “privileged location” (p. 73). There is minimal consideration as to how the meanings the audience derives from the texts are utilized and circulated in everyday life. The conclusions asserted by Wulff (1995) in her analysis of teenage ethnicity and femininity shadowed the theorization put forth by Brunt. She states that “culture consists of flows of meanings that people create and interpret when they communicate with each other both directly face-to-face and also indirectly by way of media” (p.65). The “flows of meanings” that emerge in social circles are based upon “cultural concerns that relate to their specific situation” which are re-worked such that they correspond to the group’s own “terms as far as it is possible” (p. 65). Therefore, only after witnessing how a particular issue is absorbed into the quotidian practice of a social group can the significance of the text be accurately comprehended.

Ewen (1976), in his influential book that attempts to map the role advertising played in the evolution of consumer culture in the advanced stages of capitalism, pays little attention to how meanings discerned from mass culture are actually embedded in everyday life. His account traces the intentions of marketers and assumes that the consuming public will passively absorb these messages. Lee (1993) provides a succinct account of the logic that underlies the approach administered by Ewen, and other like-minded academics. He writes,

Ideologically and aesthetically contextualized by advertising, design, marketing and other promotional forms, commodities are to be considered as 'texts' inviting certain preferred forms of reading and decoding which aim to reproduce dominant relations...[and] patterns of life. (p. 49)

Ewen (1976) argues that advertising and the messages it presented were instrumental in dissipating labour unrest while simultaneously radically re-formulating the traditional structures of social life. To this effect, Ewen states that the "linking of marketplace to utopian ideals, to political and social freedom . . . represents the spectacle of liberation emanating from the bowels of domination and denial" (p. 200). Although Ewen's account is provocative, its refusal to acknowledge any resistive or interpretive freedom of the individual limits the efficacy of his arguments. In his account, the meanings inscribed within the commodity obligate the consumer at the level of the unconscious to particular patterns of behavior and sets of beliefs.

A final form of resistive-empowering consumerism of which Nava (1987) speaks is consumer activism. She argues that forms of consumer activism empower the consumer to resist against huge conglomerates in circumstances where the individual feels most helpless. Nava suggests that these methods of being heard are particularly appealing because they authorize the people usually excluded from political and economic arenas, namely women and the young. However, her advocacy of consumer activist groups takes an essentialist turn as she suggests that women—as the natural bearers of life and health on earth and as those who traditionally have the purchasing power—are strategically positioned and empowered in the consumer activist movement. Besides her obvious romance with constructed notions of womanhood, Nava fails to consider the diverse locations in which women are positioned culturally and socially, these locations variously impacting on their consumer activist potential. Women of lower class may not have the income, time or transportation possibilities to be politically discerning in the goods they purchase. Furthermore, men may not do the shopping, but to ignore the power relations that exist within heterosexual relationships is to disregard the patriarchal structures of Western society that continue to foster subordination of women.

In her Foucauldian conceptualization of the power relations within consumption, Nava (1987) considers the foundations of consumer-oriented culture within advanced capitalism to be an “ever-expanding discursive apparatus” (206) whereby “consumerism can be argued to exercise control through the incitement and proliferation of increasingly detailed and comprehensive discourses” (p. 207). Lehtonen (1993) articulates similar sentiments by implementing the metaphor of the consumer “gaze” to describe how the individual comes to perceive their shopping environment. In this analysis, the gaze is not

envisioned as a deterministic framework that is externally formulated and imposed upon the passive consumer. Rather, the gaze,

is largely a socially produced and learned way of perceiving the environment, and at the same time it gives the shopper a position in the environment. . . advertisements channel the gaze, but it is not reducible to them. . . the gaze helps create its environment. (p. 6)

The gaze—understood as a dialectical formulation comprised of both the messages of the mass media and the individuality of the consumer and their social circumstances—functions by providing a mental framework that articulates the space of the shopping mall, while simultaneously forming a place for the individual within that environment. Although Lehtonen’s conceptualization is limited to the shopping mall, Nava makes it clear that consumer discourse circulates and encroaches upon nearly all aspects of social life.

In recognition of the influence of consumer rhetoric, Langman (1992) comments that to remove oneself from consumer discourse is not merely a case of rejecting “commodity based selfhood” (p. 60). Individuals continue to define and understand themselves through a comparative gaze or by “looking at the Other” (Langman, 1992, p. 60). Therefore, much of one’s identity is based in reference to the social milieu of those around one, and to be completely outside consumer discourse is to be eccentric. As the multiplicity of cultural forms increasingly becomes enveloped and comprehended in

relation to consumerism, the “arbitrary become typifications...[and] deviance can evoke various forms of anxiety” (Langman, 1992, p. 47).

Feminist Perspectives on Consumption

Bordo’s (1991) critique of women and their relationship to the fashion industry seems to accord the consumer a limited amount of agency. Bordo acknowledges the plural subjectivities of the consuming individual, but continues to argue that, in the name of fashion and “creative expression” (p. 111), women are subjecting themselves to a homogenizing process. She contends that the significance of the fashion subjectivities to which women expose themselves differs according to historical, cultural and social relations. Therefore, a black woman dying her hair blonde has historical antecedents (racism) which are “effaced” by notions of freedom of expression and choice.

The potency of the disciplinary techniques to which women subject themselves in their search for beauty is sublimated by the naive pleas that it is “only fashion” (Bordo, 1991, p. 111). Through fashion, women are supposedly expressing their creativity in a manner that makes them feel good about themselves. However, Bordo argues that to submit to such hedonistic rituals is to be passively complicit in the construction of normalized conceptions of femininity that result in a perpetual subordination of women.

Using a Foucauldian framework, Bartky (1988) isolates three ways in which women come to discipline themselves according to the normalizing discourses of beauty: (a) women actively pursue and desire particular body shapes; (b) women adopt a gendered form of body language that ultimately signifies a submissive disposition; and

(c) women come to treat their body as an “ornamented surface” (p. 70). The seductive possibilities of the fashion industry are such that Bartky (1988) likens them to a way of being or a “style of flesh” (p. 78) so fundamental to the orientation of the female existence that to reject its form is to destroy her “social universe” (p. 79). Through this analogy, Bartky reveals how the fashion industry is more than just a style of dress; it is also a way of understanding oneself and the complex web of social relations in which one lives. The women that live within the codes of the fashion industry are rewarded for subjecting themselves to the disciplinary practices of fashion since they attain a communicable “cultural currency” or obtain the recognition that comes from being “with it” (p. 81).

Probyn (1990) demonstrates how women, as consumers, are seemingly empowered through the extension of choice, or “choiceoisie,” a term she borrows from Savan (1989) to implicate the new traditionalism and postfeminist under-pinnings associated with notions of choice. She continues by noting that the “ideology of choiceoisie operates not on choice but as a reaffirmation” (p. 152) of dominant images of women. Probyn likens the choice extended by the postfeminist marketers to that of liberal feminism, but notes that it is “shorn of its political programme—it is choice freed of the necessity of thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing” (1990, p. 156). Cole and Hribar (1995) complement the work of Probyn in commenting that postfeminism has resulted in the re-articulation of feminist sentiment such that the aspirations of liberation are diverted from tangible social reform towards the innocuous realm of consumer desires. It is in this manner that feminist attitudes are “reterritorialized through the normalizing logic” (p. 356) as provided by consumer culture. Therefore, under the guise

of “choice” and free expression, women are given a “public language”, albeit a language informed by a neo-traditionalist framework, to talk about and envision themselves (Probyn, 1990, p. 154).

Probyn (1990) suggests that mediated representations are not closed or “hermeneutically sealed” (p. 50), but rather are purposefully left open to viewer interpretation because it is at this moment that the derived messages gain their discursive potential. Goldman and Papsan (1994) complement Probyn’s work noting that advertisements rely on the cultural capital of the viewer to complete the meaning (or decode) the advertisement. Such positioning is effective in that it borrows “legitimacy from the individual’s everyday life” (p. 48). For the viewer, the interpretation of the ad becomes linked to, and indistinguishable from the “real.” The viewer unconsciously makes connections between the represented images and the “real,” which results in a broader linkage to other ideological formations.

Cole and Hribar (1995) illustrate how Nike was successful in forming an ideological bridge between movement feminism and the consumption practices of women. Nike’s slogan, “Just do it,” seemingly empowers women to take control of their lives, thus dismissing the “historical, cultural and structural circumstances” (p. 153) that stand in opposition to the emancipation of women. Ultimately, the authorization that Nike extends to women coincides with a broader ideological framework of neo-traditionalism in the United States where individuals are responsible for themselves. Social ills such as poverty and unemployment are not considered to be systemic failings of the nation, rather responsibility is re-conceptualized as character flaws within the individual. With systemic causality out of the way, Nike is able to symbolically merge the opposing sentiments of

the feminist movement with dominant political ideologies into a mentality that preaches individual conquest through consumption. Cole and Hribar characterize Nike as being “celebrity feminist” for its role in the “re-articulation of women’s issues” (p. 350) towards an individualizing mentality of empowerment through consumption.

In discussing the controversy surrounding Renee Richards, a transsexual professional tennis player, Birrell and Cole (1990) demonstrate the vehemence with which our culture defends the notion of two mutually exclusive and opposite sexes. The article describes the role of sport in the policing and producing of the barriers and distinctions between the two categories. The commodities associated with sport undoubtedly reflect these same distinctions. Lunt and Livingstone (1992) have noted that the ideologies surrounding masculinity and femininity are embedded in the differential goods that men and women own and consume.

Nava (1987) suggests that consumerism has allowed women to experience empowerment in ways that have raised questions about their allotment in other facets of society. However, Nava (1987) acknowledges that the increased awareness that women have acquired through consumerism is simultaneously a system that subjugates them to a disciplinary form of control. Bartky (1988) argues that women may have gained freedom away from the domestic sphere, but she predicts that this ultimately situates women as more susceptible to the “dominating gaze of patriarchy” (pp. 82-83). Nixon (1992) notes that the rhetoric surrounding consumption has typically been addressed to the feminine consumer, encouraging her to see herself as a “spectacle” for the “predominantly male gaze” (p. 151). Therefore, the perceived freedom offered to women through rituals of

consumption may in fact be a method of policing boundaries of femininity through increased exposure to the gaze of patriarchy.

Consumer Culture and the Body

By focusing attention on the body as a site of social contestation, Foucault greatly added to contemporary debates regarding power discourses. His conceptualization of the body/power relationship is enmeshed throughout much of contemporary understandings of consumer culture. Foucault (1980) asserts that “we find a new method of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of social control by repression but that of control by stimulation” (p. 57). Foucault argues that power “produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse...It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body” (p. 119). The productivity of power in a consumer society circulates through the “social body” as products are purchased and enter the lives of the individual. Nava (1987) refers to consumption as an “ever-expanding discursive apparatus” (p. 206); Debord (1994) speaks of the ideology inscribed within material goods; Probyn (1990) refers to the pre-defined commodified packages relieving the consumer of politically charged choices; and Cole and Hribar (1995) discuss the parasitic manner in which Nike appropriates feminist discourse to re-present its image as a gender-sensitive company. Each of the authors quoted in the preceding sentence demonstrate how consumption has become a structure of knowledges that penetrates the individual at multiple levels, creating tensions, anxieties and desires that can only be

reconciled through consumption. In this manner, consumption becomes an integral facet in familiarizing and defining the social milieu in which the individual exists.

Fundamental to consumer culture are the Foucauldian notions of panopticism and discipline. Foucault interpreted discipline as a technique that implemented “normalization rather than repression to ‘invest’ bodies” (Rail & Harvey, 1995, p. 165). Therefore, the knowledges inscribed into consumer goods become accepted or normalized into the consciousness of the individual such that consumer discourses constitute a way of seeing and being. Foucault’s explanation of the power within discipline consisted of “rendering the bodily behavior routine, repetitive, mechanically predictable, subject...to codification and hence ‘objective’ scrutiny and assessment” (Bauman, 1983, p. 33). This definition neatly ties into the Foucauldian notion of surveillance, where “power operates in such a way as to make relevant behavior visible, transparent, accessible to evaluation and correction” (Bauman, 1983, p. 33). Therefore, bodily practices become normalized through the omnipresent surveying gaze of individuals. Consumer culture discourse provides a discipline, or knowledge, which informs the mental conceptualizations people use to evaluate or make judgments about those around them. Therefore, individuals are seemingly extended the privilege of unfettered consumption that ultimately serves to construct their own unique identity. Nevertheless, the appearance of individuality through consumption is somewhat mystified by the normalizing knowledges of consumer culture serving to create a society that vigorously monitors the Other.

Hargreaves (1987) comments that the various presentations of the body “constitute a language structuring social action” (p. 140). In this regard, the body itself is discursive, and connected to it are meanings and ways of relating within the social world. Sport,

within consumer culture, plays a crucial role in structuring this so-called language of the body.

Hargreaves (1986, 1987) and Featherstone (1983, 1991) comment as to how consumer culture creates emotional needs that appear to be satiable only through consumption. Featherstone (1991) elaborates on the phenomenon, demonstrating how advertising serves to “create a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable,” resulting in extreme scrutiny of the body in search of “imperfections that could no longer be regarded as natural”(p. 175). By portraying immaculately contrived images as versions of the ‘normal’ body, the advertising industry solicits sentiments of ‘abnormality’ in the masses.

Rail (1998) contends that the body, as it is envisioned in its mediated forms, must not be understood as the natural body, but rather as the end result of a series of productions that work to construct a particular version of the body. Rail claims that in the “postmodern condition, the natural body disintegrates and what is apprehended as the body is only simulacrum” (p. 148). Through comparison of ones’ own body with the constructed utopian bodily images appearing in the media, one’s anxieties build (Featherstone, 1991) while resolution of such anxieties is envisaged through consumption (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Lafrance, 1998).

Collective society is replaced with the alienated individual who internalizes notions of his or her bodily inadequacies (Hargreaves, 1987). Consumer culture bestows individuals with the responsibility of eradicating personal “deformities.” Featherstone (1991) argues that the individuation of responsibility for the body re-defines biologically determined features (hair, teeth, age) of the body as “plastic” (p. 178). This re-

conceptualization of the body functions such that “individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 178). Failure on the part of the person to meet the constructed standards of “normality” can be “interpreted as signs of moral laxitude” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 178).

What is considered to be the normal body at any moment is contingent on what constitutes the abnormal body (Cole & Hribar, 1995; LaFrance, 1998). Cole and Hribar state that “the border that marks the self is continuously generated through a social process of producing and policing the other” (1995, p. 355). However, the othered body is constantly being re-defined, which concomitantly shifts the characteristics of the normal body (Cole, 1998). Cole envisions this binary relationship as a mechanism of social control arguing that “the modern regime organized itself through a division between the normal and the pathological; producing a deviance and threat located in the body-corporeal identity” (p. 268). Therefore, the self is understood in relation to that which is othered, whether it be soft bodies (Cole & Hribar, 1995), deviant bodies (Cole, 1996), or addicted bodies (Cole, 1998). LaFrance (1998) takes the argument one step further by suggesting that the images of othered bodies serve to distance and affirm dominant bodies. Individuals possessing dominant bodies recognize the privilege that popular discourse accords their bodies, which simultaneously further pathologizes deviant bodies. Advertisements that “repetitiously solicit the hard body” (Cole & Hribar, 1995, p. 355) are understood in juxtaposition to the soft body, thus conjuring sentiments of body maintenance and consumption in order to distance and stabilize one’s identity from that of the other (Cole & Hribar, 1995). Popular consumer discourse is replete with notions of what constitutes an acceptable body. These corporeal conceptualizations, in

their discursive form, work to normalize certain bodily characteristics. It is with respect to this that Hargreaves (1986) notes that “consumer discourse/practice structures and satisfies individual desire so that individuals enthusiastically discipline themselves” (p. 141).

Sport and Consumption

With respect to sport and consumption, Cole and King (1998) argue that blackness and its surrounding culture have become “highly commodified and marketable” (p. 2). Black superstar athletes such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson are fundamental characters within “racially coded” success stories that mythologize individual transcendence from inner-city ghettos to athletic and financial notoriety. The political significance of these success stories, argues Cole (1996), is to stabilize notions of the “American Dream” by effacing the structural barriers that prevent the majority of black Americans living in poverty from achieving upward mobility similar to that of Jordan and Johnson. The obsessive popular romance with black personalities like Michael Jordan are only fully understood in binary opposition to the portrayal of the urban gang (Cole, 1996, 1998; Cole & King, 1998). Cole and King elaborate on this phenomenon, commenting that,

Black urban masculinity was visualized(enacted and encoded) through a fundamental distinction between the athlete (primarily figured in the urban basketball player) and the criminal (typically figured through the gang

member): the tension generated between the two categories served as the grounds for well-rehearsed and familiar 1980's stories continually circulated and fed by the mass media industry for public consumption and spectatorship.(p. 2)

Popular mythology surrounding the “sport-gang dyad” created a public hysteria where gangs came to be understood as the evil temptation alluring African Americans from sport towards a life of crime (Cole, 1996). Similarly, in popular discourses, the gang culture became accountable for inner-city deterioration in general (Cole, 1996). Through the imagery of the sport-gang dyad, American consciousness is effectively absolved of its responsibility for inner-city destitution and fault is re-articulated as a personality deficiency on the part of black Americans.

Cole (1996) suggests that the rhetoric informing the sport-gang dyad has impacted popular perceptions of how African Americans utilize their sporting goods. She states that “the category of ‘use’ invoked through sport (cast as purely utilitarian) and fashion (cast as the pollution of the symbolic) also re-establishes the distance between utopic and dystopic figures” (Cole, 1996, p. 376). The appropriation of Nike shoes for their status-signifying potential by black youths, as opposed to their athletic use (use value), has been condemned and questioned within media discourse so as to further demonize black youth. However, it is understood that Nike is not intelligible without reference to Michael Jordan and vice versa (Cole, 1996). Nike CEO, Phil Knight, alludes to the commodity fetishistic properties of his corporation’s products by noting that Nike is “a brand...with a genuine and distinct personality” (Knight, 1998, p. 2). Similarly, the mediated

construction of Michael Jordan has created him as a “commodity sign” (Andrews, 1992, p. 10). Michael Jordan the athlete has not been commodified, but his fabricated persona, in all of its multiplicity, has become the commodity. Both Jordan and Nike, in their synergistic relationship, have come to be understood in terms of their sign value as opposed to their use value. However, paradoxically, when African-American youth appropriate the sign-value of Nike—as opposed to using the equipment for purely utilitarian purposes—they are accused of ill-virtue within mainstream media.

It has been suggested by some authors (Andrews, 1992; Cole, 1996; Jackson, 1994; Kellner, 1996) that the use of a black athlete for promotional purposes requires that the character of the personality be well-known to the readers of the advertisement so that stereotypical racial connotations do not threaten the interpreters. For instance, Kellner comments on Michael Jordan: “his representations are largely positive and his figure has been used to represent an ideal of Blackness that American society as a whole can live with” (1996, p. 462). Similarly, Jackson (1994) states that the “assumed knowledge effectively suppresses the more threatening aspects of a stereotypically anonymous and rapacious black male sexuality, provoking desire without evoking dread” (p. 49). Therefore, a black male promotional figure must undergo a mediated fabrication before he is able to undauntingly seduce the imagination of the consumer.

Racist notions of blacks and whites assume that blacks naturally possess superior physicality while whites are intellectually privileged (Jackson, 1994). Popular discourses regarding the capabilities of blacks result in a public consciousness that assumes athletics to be the primary vehicle to social mobility available to blacks (Cole, 1996; Cole & King, 1998; Jackson, 1994). Wilson (1996) attempted to discern the differential perceptions of

adolescent male black and non-black viewers observing athletic apparel commercials that feature black athletes. The author discovered that despite the similarity in cultural location (age and basketball fanaticism), racial difference affected the individual interpretation of the commercials. In some cases, blacks enjoyed the ads, but consciously feared that the ads might be misinterpreted by white viewers such that they either affirmed already existing stereotypical conceptions of blacks or worked to establish such notions. Non-blacks enjoyed the ads, but the ads served to foster a perception of blacks as naturally superior athletes. Furthermore, the media portrayals perpetuated notions of black athletes as athletes and only athletes (as opposed to scholars and financiers and so forth).

Sport and Consumer Culture

Because the preoccupation of sport is with the body and its ensuing biological discourse, sport proves to be a robust ideological vehicle (Cole, 1993; Rail, 1998). Furthermore, Hargreaves (1986) recognizes that “the more the ludic element is present the more efficacious it is as an instrument of control” (p. 222). The unassuming and seemingly neutral position that sport occupies in popular understandings enables sport to be laden with ideological inscriptions. The sporting body “is always in the process of becoming” (Cole, 1993, p. 87). Therefore, the capitalist interests that motivate consumer culture attempt to colonize the ever incomplete sporting body thus resulting in a captive and continuously consuming audience. The consumption process is never complete, perfection is never actualized. Rather, it is a tireless process of regimentation of bodily

rituals that happens to conveniently correspond with consumption of commodities which supposedly aid the “body beautiful.” Wearing and Wearing (1992) illustrate this phenomenon in commenting that “the simple physical activity of running has been transformed by fashion, the organization of commerce, scientific analysis, the media and leisure industry, into a multi-million dollar industry” (p. 3).

In recognition of the persuasiveness of sport, Cole (1993) suggests that sport be “understood as a technology...an ensemble of knowledges and practices that disciplines, conditions, reshapes, and inscribes the body through the terms and needs of a patriarchal, racist capitalism” (p. 86). It is in this context that Cole refers to the manner in which “the body and exercise have become commodified in ways which manage gender relations” (p. 86). Contrary to popular contemporary assumptions, Cole argues that aerobics and exercise are not necessarily empowering opportunities for women to take control of their bodies. Rather, they are a perpetuation of knowledges that call for the self-regimentation of the female body in accordance with normalizing technologies. Cole comments that “in this cultural logic, women produce themselves as commodities; identities, exchange value and self-worth are embedded in body management” (p. 87). Conceptions of freedom of expression in the female body are more appropriately recognized as a guise behind which consumer culture interests create knowledges by which women are subjected to panopticism and discipline; most acutely experienced in response to the scrutiny of the omnipresent patriarchal gaze.

Rail (1998) suggests that the mythology surrounding the athletic body seemingly empowers the individual to differentiate the self from the other in a two fold manner through body physique and through performative capability. In this way the “athletic

body fascinates...because it signifies a dream” (1998, p. 149). Popular constructions of the athletic body suggest the body can be removed from the clutches of nature and relocated under the control of the individual (Rail, 1998). Consumer discourses are fundamental in the construction and perpetuation of such transcendental visions. Wearing and Wearing (1992) remark that leisure is equally as important in constituting identity as is one’s job or occupation. If, as Wearing and Wearing (1992) assert, leisure is increasingly dominated by consumption, then individual identity is at least partly defined in terms of a commodified leisure.

Hargreaves (1986, 1987) and Featherstone (1991) point out that some of the reoccurring themes within consumer culture include youth, beauty, fitness and health. These associated images are captured in commonly held perceptions of sport, particularly as represented in the arena of professional spectacles. Sport spectacles offer a facade of eternal youth. Images of hyper-athletic bodies in the prime of their physicality are situated in associative relation to various commodities such that the spectator-consumer is cajoled into making a link between youth, virility, beauty and the sport commodity.

The relentless quest to seek new aesthetic frontiers in attempts to create and perpetuate ever greater consumer desire has led to what Featherstone (1991a) calls the “aestheticization of everyday life.” Here, a hierarchy of sign-values is inscribed into the most mundane of consumer activities. For instance, Rail (1998) argues that sport is engaged in a “dialectical relationship” (p. 147) with art in order to construct commodities that “reproduce postmodern aesthetics...and facilitate their hyper-consumption” (p. 146). Through the orchestrated blurring of traditional boundaries between art and sport, the perceptual senses of the consumer are seemingly offered new levels of stimulation. The

goal in commodifying sport is to create an ever-evolving commodity that can be marketed and perpetually consumed by the anticipating fan.

Youth, Sport and Consumption

Miles (1996) uses Bourdieu's formulation of "cultural capital," or the social currency of a particular group, to explain how individuals within peer groups construct their identity. From his research of both male and female adolescent respondents, the author concluded that the individual carves a self-identity by appropriating particular aspects of a broader consumer culture in accordance with the aesthetics with which the individual identifies.

The investigation into the life world of "mall rats" and "mall bunnies" (young men and women who spend a great deal of their leisure time at malls) by Lewis (1989) provides an excellent example of the negotiations that occur between social groups and the broader consumer culture which they face. Lewis found that within the peer group of mall rats and bunnies, it was socially unacceptable for individuals to purchase "shiny, new media material" (p. 887). Simultaneously, however, the author found that it was quite appropriate for the members of the group to speak of issues that have emerged from the consumer culture that they seemingly reject. It seems as though the reluctance to buy new commodities may be a result of economic insufficiency, and this reality has been incorporated as a distancing mechanism into the identity of the group. In his study investigating British punk culture, Hebdige (1979) found that punk symbolic "statements, no matter how strongly constructed, were cast in a language which was generally

available—a language which was current” (p. 87). Therefore, the preceding authors indicate that subversive symbolism still operates in the realm of the consumer culture it rejects, thus making antagonistic statements inextricable from the medium against which they launch their attacks.

In his ethnographic analysis of British youth and early adults, Willis (1990) detailed how they manipulate popular culture in the process of “symbolic creativity” whereby they are able to “express and develop their understanding of themselves as unique persons, to signify who they are, and who they think they are” (p. 89). Contrasted with the work of Miles (1996), Willis did not find the role of the peer group’s cultural capital as influential in the evolution of youth identities. Rather, his research results seem to indicate that the consumer engages in a relatively independent dialectic with popular culture. Willis is reasonably adamant in his defense of the assets of commodified culture. He argues that creative expression is a necessary part of the everyday activities of human life. For Willis, everyday symbolic work is integral to the “production and reproduction of human existence” (p. 9) because of its communicative capacities. The communicative dimension of consumer culture becomes increasingly important in contemporary society because it effectively aids in the formation and display of identities in the absence of other more traditional institutions of creative potential. Willis argues that with the gradual deterioration of social orders such as the church, and family and with the innocuous requirements of a large proportion of the jobs within the labor market, the individual has to search elsewhere for creative expressions that provide meaningful definition to one’s life. However, for Willis, individuals do not placidly absorb the preferred meanings inscribed into the cultural text, instead, they bring “experience, feelings, social position

and social membership to their encounter with commerce” (p. 21) in the process of what Willis calls the “grounded aesthetic.” He employs the term “grounded” so as to demonstrate the commonness or the everyday occurrence of this type of creativity, distinguishing this form of art from the unnecessarily arrogant “high arts.” Willis defines his concept of grounded aesthetic as the “creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, re-selected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings” (p. 21). Willis contends that the individual, through the splicing of diverse symbols and products, is the architect of meaning as opposed to the producers of the material commodity. In Willis’ account of the consumption experience, consumers are empowered by the plethora of decisions available to them, thus providing them with the materials by which they are able to carve, demonstrate and actualize their own unique character.

In his review of Willis’ (1990) book, Laermans (1993) was critical of how the respondents did not seem to defend their cultural choices as “better” compared with those of others. It is possible that Willis was so preoccupied with his central tenet—that taste is relative and no objective standard exists by which to measure “good” taste—that he failed to recognize that an integral element in identity formation is how people coalesce, either in repudiation or affiliation, around sentiments of taste. The liberating potential Willis attributes to popular culture consumption has subtle differences from the conclusions Hebdige (1979) derived in his seminal work on British youth subcultures. In contrast to Willis, Hebdige comments that subcultures “communicate through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully

distorted or overthrown” and that because of this it is difficult to “maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other” (p. 95). Hebdige seems to have a more skeptical approach to commercial commodities, which he envisions as partially oppressive, whereas Willis believes that they are the primary vehicle to achieving the “emancipation of everyday culture” (p. 18) in contemporary society.

Wilson and Sparks (1996) attempted to demonstrate how social positioning affects the decision-making abilities of the consumer by implementing Radaway’s concept of “interpretive communities.” The authors found that the interpretive readings of advertisements featuring black male athletes differed according to race and geographic location amongst adolescent males. White youth participants from Vancouver (chosen for its small black population) felt that the ads were more or less accurate representations of blacks. However, black youths from Toronto (chosen for its racial heterogeneity) enjoyed the ads but recognized them as partial truths. They felt that the ads propagated the notion that blacks are natural athletes thus impeding alternative conceptions of black masculinity. The interpretations of white youth participants from Toronto lay somewhere between the white respondents of Vancouver and the black participants in Toronto. The authors concluded that these patterns of interpretation were indicative of how social variables, such as race and geographic location (and its corresponding racial composition), are instrumental in facilitating the assumptions people derive from the mediated images that surround them. By using Radaway’s notion of interpretive communities, the authors were able to demonstrate how communication among groups of

people is influential in forming the interpretive structure by which people read social texts.

As an investigative tool, Miles used focus groups as well as working as a clerk within a sporting goods store that was predominately patronized by young people. Miles (1996) found that young individuals neither passively absorbed marketing logic nor acted in complete isolation in the sea of cultural commodities. Rather, individual identity is negotiated through affiliation with a particular group that collectively responds to consumer culture through borrowing, implementing and repudiating various commodities, attitudes and practices. Although the group may only comprehend itself in relation to the rhetoric of consumer culture, Miles suggests that it is the intimate dynamics of peer relations that has more influence over the individual as opposed to the distant allure of consumer culture.

Conclusion

Although there is much debate surrounding how the individual negotiates the experience of consumption, there are a few points that seem to have reasonable consensus within the academic community. Many authors (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995; Wilson & Sparks, 1997; Wulff, 1995) acknowledge that consumption is a social process whereby a variety of factors such as race, ethnicity, class and gender intersect and influence the consumer decisions made by the individual. In the preceding review of literature, no instances were found where the author argued that the individual acts in complete social isolation as he or she determine his or her consumption practices. Furthermore,

consumption was found to be a gendered activity (Fischer & Gainer, 1994; Lee & Browne, 1995; Slater, Rouner, Domeneuch-Rodriguez, Beauvais, Murphy & Van Leuven, 1997). In other words, these authors found that commodities were consumed differentially along gender lines.

The discrepancies between the assertions of various authors usually centered around the amount of creative autonomy the consumer exercised. Most of the authors cited above espoused sentiments similar to Langman's (1992) conception of the dialectic of empowerment and enfeeblement. This idea infers that the individual acquires the sensation of control through the act of consumption, but simultaneously is subjected to the oppressive cycle of domination that is inherent within the consumer culture of a capitalist society. A small minority of writers (e.g. McRobbie, 1994; Willis, 1990) demonstrates tremendous faith in the integrity of the individual mind and its ability to assert imaginative autonomy. These writers argue that the appropriation of the commercial commodity and its incorporation into the everyday cultures of youth have been instrumental in the empowerment of young people. As opposed to conceptualizing consumption as a sight of oppression, they envision young people re-articulating elements of consumer culture in accordance with their experiences, social backgrounds and attitudes, in the process of making symbolic statements.

Although there is an abundance of literature that explicate the consumption experience through theoretical accounts, there are relatively few empirical studies (e.g. Lewis, 1989; Willis, 1990) that attempt to understand youth consumption in general, and even fewer investigate (Miles, 1996; Wilson & Sparks, 1997) youth consumption of sports commodities specifically. It is expected that the present study will elaborate upon

the following issues: (a) how massified symbols found within the theatre of consumption are embraced and manipulated by communities of young men and women to formulate localized meanings within their everyday lives; (b) how young men and women negotiate the various debilitating obstacles that are necessarily a part of the consumption experience to present themselves as empowered, autonomous individuals; and (c) how gender, race and ethnicity are variously expressed within the field of consumption to create a diversity of meanings in the processes of identity formation and identification.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the methodological practices this study shall employ and their theoretical underpinnings. The first section describes the theoretical framework of cultural studies, including a summary of ethnomethodology. After which, a section is dedicated to describing the characteristics of the sample to be used in the investigation. The third section briefly describes the format of the small group discussions. Next, a section elaborates on the data collection procedures. The final section gives a brief account of the data analysis procedures.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Borrowing from Cultural Studies and Ethnomethodology

In an attempt to gain greater insight into the complexity of the youth experience of consumption of sports commodities this investigation borrowed from particular aspects of the philosophical and methodological foundations of cultural studies and ethnomethodology. Being that the present theoretical overview will incorporate the feminist concepts of patriarchy and gender, it is more appropriate to speak in terms of feminist cultural studies. In so doing, it was expected that these methods would complement each other, allowing the researcher to piece together a unique methodology by which to best reveal the intricacies of the everyday experiences of consumption.

Cultural studies avails itself to this type of methodological liberty by maintaining an “actively and aggressively anti-disciplinary” (Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg, 1991, p. 2) rationale. Nelson and his colleagues (1992) explain that cultural studies rejects the “formalized disciplinary practices of the academy,” because these paradigms are too often associated with a “heritage of disciplinary investments and exclusions and a history of social effects” (p.2) from which cultural studies attempts to distance itself.

For the practitioners of cultural studies, the fundamental purpose is to penetrate and unveil the dynamics of culture. Culture, as it is defined here, is understood as the “different forms of sense making, within various settings, in societies incessantly marked by change and conflict” (Green, 1996, p. 126). This operative definition of culture emphasizes two aspects that are crucial to the investigation that follows. First, the material commodities themselves are not constitutive of culture, but rather, it is how people relate and come to understand themselves, in a particular context, in relation to the commodities, that epitomizes culture. Second, culture is not static, nor passive. Culture is characterized by continuous flux and re-alignment in accordance with the specificities of power endemic to the social, political and economic context out of which it is generated. Therefore, due to the ever-evolving nature of culture, any attempt to capture it through research will result in isolating a particular moment which is inevitably immersed within a specific context (Green, 1996). This realization should curtail the temptation to construct elaborate narratives that universalize culture while disregarding temporal and contextual considerations.

Furthermore, Nelson and his colleagues (1992) reject the notion that the researcher can be totally freed from cultural bias. Instead, they propose that the pursuers of cultural

studies embrace his or her biases and envision themselves as “politically engaged participants” (p. 5) in the dialogical process of unraveling the conscious and unconscious structures of culture. Brunt (1992) suggests that the researcher should confront and reveal his or her biases by acknowledging that “yes I’m a fan [a biased participant] but also I am differently located, and that has certain implications and responsibilities” (p. 80). Brunt astutely focuses the positioning of the researcher with her comments. As an academic interested in a particular social phenomenon, it would be impossible for that person to occupy a position identical with that of the participants of the study. The present investigation accepted Brunt’s logic therefore it was important that I candidly identified my positioning (age, gender, education, interest in the area, consumption history, etc.) both in the discussion groups and in the ensuing write-up. This type of academic honesty was expected to aid me as well as the participants and others interested in the work in deciding my sincerity and the integrity of my results.

Cultural studies, with its methodological indecisiveness along with its regard for the mundane aspects of life, readily allows this investigation to incorporate the conceptual underpinnings of ethnomethodology, which similarly respects the common sense understandings of the experience of everyday life as a phenomenon worthy of empirical scrutiny. Like with cultural studies, there is a “degree of variety—even ambiguity—in [the] epistemological underpinnings” (Atkinson, 1988, p. 461) of ethnomethodology. The epistemological plurality that is associated with ethnomethodology has resulted in a diversity of approaches to researching any given phenomenon. The comments that Nelson and his co-authors make about cultural studies apply equally to ethnomethodology when they note that “the choice of research practices depends on the

questions that are asked” (p. 2). The choice of methodology should emanate from the phenomenon under investigation as opposed to the prescriptions of abstract theories.

The format of the present research consists of small groups of youths involved in discussions regarding their experiences with the consumption of sports related commodities. Ethnomethodology and cultural studies understand that interpretive frameworks are socially formulated, whereby people situated in particular contexts collectively come to make sense of their surroundings. Therefore, it only seems appropriate to discuss consumption patterns that best encompass a variety of the social dynamics (class, gender and ethnicity) that are found outside the “research setting.” However, Brunt (1992) astutely warns against the impossibility of trying to re-create the broader consumption environment within research groups. She suggests that each group will develop a unique complexion of social indices in accordance with the circumstances of the group. She states of her own research that,

What we wanted to do was to try not to think of class as some inert outside, macro-level “thing” that operates on another “thing”, the small group. Rather, we wanted to think of class, along with other social determinations, as also internal to the group...” (p. 74)

Another advantage of using small group discussions is highlighted by Atkinson (1988) who notes that the phenomenological philosophies upon which ethnomethodology is based, privilege common talk as a “primary, socially shared resource in the construction of meaning and the constitution of everyday reality” (p. 449). It is suggested,

therefore, that the casual conversation occurring within the discussion groups could potentially allude to the mental formations that are applied in relation to the consumption experience such that the activity acquires social meaning. Holstein and Gurbrium (1994) elaborate on how ethnomethodology attempts to achieve this heightened insight;

ethnomethodological approach treats objective reality as an interactional and discursive accomplishment; descriptions, accounts, or reports are not merely about some social world as much as they are constitutive of that world. The approach does not attempt to generate information about interaction or discourse through interviews or questionnaires, but relies upon naturally occurring talk to reveal the ways ordinary interaction produces social order in the settings where the talk occurs. (p. 265)

The discussions within the groups were not necessarily reflective of the objective truth of the consumption experience. Instead, through the process of discussing the activity of consumption in the social environment of the group, it was expected that the participants would reveal how they align themselves in relation to sports commodities. As Sharrock and Anderson (1986) comment of the ethnomethodological method, the process of “describing social activities is part and parcel of the activities so described” (p. 57). Although the participants were not objective (it is doubtful that such objectivity can ever be accomplished), the performative account was expected to give insight into how the participants negotiate their identity through consumption.

A brief overview of the key concepts that are acknowledged as essential within the ethnomethodological framework were selected to focus the present study. Holstein and Gurbrium (1994) paraphrase the work of Schutz noting that the “social sciences should focus on the ways that the life world—that is the experiential world every person *takes for granted*—is produced and experienced” (p. 263). Schutz presented the idea of stocks of knowledge, or conceptual categories that originate socially. Stocks of knowledge provide a framework with which people are able to “interpret experience, grasp the intentions and motivations of others, achieve intersubjective understandings, and coordinate actions” (Holstein & Gurbrium, 1994, p. 263). Stocks of knowledge seemingly render familiar the life world of the individual. This apparent acquaintance the individual has with particular phenomena within his or her world is attributable to “typifications” (Holstein & Gurbrium, 1994). Perhaps best understood as a single instance of stocks of knowledge, typifications are collectively comprehended, loose and flexible categories that provide counsel in establishing explanations and understanding of experience. Both stocks of knowledge and typifications are adaptable and necessarily incomplete. Coherence through the use of stocks of knowledge can only be ascertained when the individual utilizes his or her interpretive capacities in the “application of a category to the concrete particulars of a situation” (Holstein & Gurbrium, 1994, p. 263).

Two further concepts that illuminate the mechanisms by which people make sense of the world are indexicality and reflexivity. Indexicality infers that meaning is essentially contextual. Words, phrases, non-verbal communicative expressions and experience all acquire meaning in a dialectical process with the context in which they are situated. Reflexivity acknowledges that the context itself is generated through the activity

of description. A circular synthesis exists whereby the individual, in describing a particular circumstance, both generates the setting and is guided in the description of the context by the setting itself. Where the objective and subjective realities of this process begin and end is indeterminate and irrelevant to ethnomethodology.

Cultural studies and ethnomethodology both privilege the voice of the participant compared to the more conventional approaches to sociological inquiry. Sharrock and Anderson (1986) suggest that the ethnomethodologist should recognize that the participants are actively in the process of interpreting the myriad of phenomena that confront them daily. Therefore, they should be treated as “inquirers themselves, people who are involved—as part of their practical lives—in finding out about social structures” (p. 49). This acknowledgment serves to blur the traditionally maintained distinctions between researcher and the “researched.” Brunt (1992) develops this philosophy by emphasizing the reflexivity of the accounts given by the audience. She notes that “decoders could always be encoders too” (p. 76). Similarly, the process by which the researcher becomes competent in the common sensical formulations that assist in interpreting experience within the lives of the participants is the same process by which participants themselves are instructed. The researcher, along with the participants, is privy to the dynamics of the group that guide the evolution of meaning.

Concepts of Cultural Studies and Socialist Feminism

Ideology. Ideology, as presented by Althusser, is a “structure,” existing at the level of the unconscious that mystifies the inter-relations between people and their

environments. Ideologies are not concerned with depicting factual knowledge about social surroundings, but rather situate the individual within these structures as a functioning member. Vernon, as cited in Heck (1980), envisions ideologies as a framework for interpreting information, as opposed to a set of fixed concepts or ideas. This gives ideologies a more malleable character, allowing the individual to code, and thus comprehend, various situations in reference to the particular ideological structure(s) that occupies his or her unconscious. Ideologies, with regards to Hall's (1977) interpretation of Gramsci, are not "judged according to criterion of truth and falsehood, but according to their function and efficacy in binding together classes and class fractions in positions of dominance and subordination" (p. 48). However, the ideologies of the dominant classes are not total and coherent. Instead, ideologies are the culmination of internal struggle within the "fractions of the ruling bloc" (p. 48) as well as antagonisms external to the "ruling block." To this effect, Lewis (1992) comments that all "social formation[s] such as class, race, generation and gender *are* ideological formations—and these differing ideological formations become battlegrounds" (p. 280). Therefore, ideological structures are never stable, but continuously evolving as a result of conflict, consensus and compromise.

Hegemony. Hegemony, as articulated by Gramsci, is the attempt to reduce conflict, in the absence or minimization of a repressive State, whereby the dominant fraction will endeavor to universalize their world perspective (ideology), thus creating a more socially cohesive population. Rule, in this formation, is based upon the "consent" of the people, as opposed to physical coercion of repressive regimes. However, the "consent" of the people is not automatic; resistance is a defining characteristic of hegemonic dominance.

Therefore, hegemony is never actualized; rather it is forever in the process of emergence and re-articulation in reaction to social factors such as political re-alignment and popular uprisings. For Gramsci, the hegemony of the “ruling bloc” was not limited to the political arena. Indeed, he felt as though hegemonic dominance penetrated all aspects of social life. Therefore, everyday practices come to be an affirmation, further entrenchment, or contestation of the dominant hegemonic formation.

Power. Foucault understands power as productive in contrast to traditional conceptualizations, which tend to categorize power as singularly repressive. Foucault (1980) posits that “in defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception...power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition” (p. 119). Although power is commonly perceived as prohibitive, Foucault believes that it is far more complex than its superficial appearance reveals. For Foucault (1980) “power is strong...because...it produces effects at the level of desire-and at the level of knowledge” (p. 59). It is this productive capacity of power that enables it to enmesh, in an “uninterrupted” and “individualized” manner, the “entire social body” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). Power, as knowledge, is constitutive of our entire reality, it informs the most minuscule details of everyday life. Power is not localized, nor can it be located through scientific rigor. Rather, power is omnipresent; it occupies everyone. Foucault (1980) states that “the individual is an effect of power, and at the same time...[he/she] is the element of its articulation” (p. 98).

Gender. Eisenstein (1983) articulated gender as the “socially shaped cluster of expectations, attributes, and behaviors assigned to that category of human being by the society into which the child was born” (p. 7). However, the inscription of masculine and

feminine identities onto “apparently clear biological foundations” of male and female bodies does not produce stable cultural creations (Epstein & Straub, 1991, p. 2). Epstein and Straub argue that the “very instability” of the relationship between sex and gender illuminates the functional role they execute in maintaining and affirming ideological structures through “delimit[ing] and contain[ing] the threatening absence of boundaries between human bodies and bodily acts” (p. 2). Judith Butler (1990) develops Epstein and Straub’s allusion as to the plasticity of biological sex in commenting that “gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex...gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby sexes themselves are established” (p. 7). Butler refuses to conceive of sex as “pre-discursive” insisting that notions of gender circulate in such a manner as to give the biological binary opposition of sex the appearance of facticity. Eisenstein argues that oppression of women is produced and perpetuated “through the continued reproduction of an ideology that reinforced a separation between male and female roles, and then created or sustained a set of beliefs about the roles thus created” (p. 14).

Patriarchy. Patriarchy, crudely defined, refers to the arguably universal rule of males over females (Eisenstein, 1983). Socialist feminists would agree with Marxist feminists that much of the oppression of women can be traced to the separation of home and workplace that occurred under the auspices of capitalism. However, socialist feminists suggest that the dilemma is more complicated than this, refusing to believe that the oppression of women is located singularly within the structures of a capitalist society. Rather, they contend that “capitalism interacts with patriarchy to oppress women more egregiously than men” (Tong, 1998, p. 119). It is only through the challenging and

dismantling of both elements of the “two-headed beast of capitalist patriarchy” (p. 120) that emancipation for women can be procured.

Adolescents as Research Participants

The convenient sample of this study consisted of 47; males (n=22) and females (n=25) from North York, Kenora and Winnipeg. The majority of the participants ranged from 14 to 17 years of age, although three young men and two young women were 18 years old. In order to ensure the diversity of the responses obtained, participants of mixed ethnicity, race, gender and geographic location were sought. Furthermore, the breadth of the research necessitated that parameters not be implemented to exclude certain persons from participating based on sporting background, consumption tendencies or athletic competence. A wide range of backgrounds were included in the study in order to witness the breadth of sport and consumption as it is received in many different contexts.

Small Group Discussions as the Favored Instrument

In the present study, small discussion groups consisting of four to a maximum of seven participants were used. The average group had five participants. The topics of discussion focused on the participants’ sport consumption practices and popular culture experiences in general in an attempt to discern: (a) how massified symbols found within the theatre of consumption are embraced and manipulated by communities of young men and women to formulate localized meanings within their everyday lives; (b) how young

men and women negotiate the various debilitating obstacles that are necessarily a part of the consumption experience to present themselves as empowered, autonomous individuals; and (c) how gender, race and ethnicity are variously expressed within the field of consumption to create a diversity of meanings in the processes of identity formation and identification. An original list of questions (see Appendix III) was completed. However, due to the social nature (Jackson & Holbrook, 1995) of the consumption experience, it was felt that the small group discussion groups approximated a partial re-creation that are present within everyday consumer practices. However, as the research progressed, the majority of the questions emerged from preceding discussions. It was felt that the young participants understood their own consumption experiences better than the researcher, and therefore their comments greatly influenced the direction of the conversation. This means that the role of the discussion leader was to probe on certain issues, when need be. Many experts (Thomas, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) in qualitative research suggest that to approach a phenomenon with preconceived ideas of what should be discussed could strangle the valuable underlying issues that are trying to emerge. The flexible nature of the discussion was consistent with the goal of the researcher, which was to try and capture the emotions, perceptions and meanings that are derived from the interaction between the consumer and the sports commodities.

Rubin and Rubin (1995) state that the questioning should “match the boundaries of your study...but the scope of the questioning can shrink or expand as you learn from the interviews what concepts, values, beliefs, or norms you need to comprehend” (p. 175). Cultural interviews, or discussions, are difficult because the participants often fail to see

the relevance of the ordinary (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Therefore, the researcher used astute resourcefulness through probing, follow up questions and comparative analysis in order to reveal the subtleties of the cultural phenomenon under study.

Data Collection Procedures

To recruit the participants, the researcher contacted the North York YMCA, the Royal Lake of the Woods Yacht Club and the Kenora Youth drop in centre asking their permission and help in obtaining participants that meet the above specifications. However, all involvement in the study was on a voluntary basis. A letter of information and a consent form (see Appendix II) complying with the requirements of the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee (see letters of approval from the Ethics Committee in Appedix III) was distributed for the participants to read and sign, and have their parents do the same, before they were permitted to participate.

The researcher arranged to meet with those that volunteered to participate in the study at a particular time. Prior to that meeting, the participants were called at home to remind them of their commitment. The discussion sessions lasted between 40-60 minutes, and took place in the board room at the YMCA, the basement of the Kenora Youth centre and the cottage of one of the participants from the Yacht Club. To the degree possible, the researcher attempted to transcribe each of the audio-taped discussions before the following session. This was not always possible because often two sessions would occur in one day. However, when possible, this allowed the researcher to isolate particular themes that were emerging from the data. Because it is the *theme* that is of interest to the

researcher, it was not necessary to return to the same sample of participants. Rather, the theme was discussed, elaborated or repudiated by the new sample. All of the conversation that took place within the small discussion groups was audio-taped, and subsequently transcribed into MicroSoft, where it was then spliced into various categorical themes.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilized the theoretical concepts of ethnomethodology and cultural studies in his approach to the analysis of the raw data. Data analysis proceeded by isolating related themes into a “tree” pattern. The researcher was then able to witness interconnections between themes that required further discussion or theoretical analysis. In accordance with the recommendations of the University of Ottawa’s Human Research Ethics committee the necessary measures were taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants when writing the results. For instance, pseudonyms were used when participants were quoted and all tapes and transcripts were kept in a secure file cabinet in the researcher’s office.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter focuses on the main results of the present ethnographic inquiry. The chapter speaks to: (a) the three main narratives used by youth to interpret sports fashion consumption; (b) the issues of identity and boundary maintenance in relation to sports consumption; (c) the political economy of sports consumption; (d) the dialectics of oppression and empowerment involved in sports consumption; (e) the negotiation of gender through sports consumption.

Comfort, Quality and Look:

Three Inter-Related Narratives in Interpreting Fashion Consumption

The youth utilized three recurring and inter-related discursive concepts in communicating their motivations with regards to fashion consumption. Superficially, these three concepts, “quality,” “comfort” and “look,” were referred to with a certain degree of universality, however, a closer examination revealed that various ethnic, geographic, gender, and socio-economic communities interpreted and exercised them in different ways. It would seem to me that the consistent referral to these concepts and the various narratives that accompanied them provide a map with which we can examine and interpret the various conversations that I have recorded.

The concept of “comfort” had a dual and often simultaneous connotation referring to both a physical as well as a social dimension. The social comfort (a comfort stemming from peer acceptance) was often conflated with “look,” which proved to be the most ambiguous and unstable concept of the three. However, the social aspect of comfort finds stability through its association with the physical element. One of the participants of an all-male conversation stated of a particular style “it’s cool, it’s comfortable.” In this statement “comfortable” could either be taken as a tangible statement of physical sensation or a reference to social acceptance, or perhaps both. However, look has no associative stability. Rather, look occupies a much more relational identity. When pressured to explain what “looks good,” the conversationalists had difficulty articulating a response, and seemed more comfortable describing what does not look good. In other words, an integral aspect of communicating their style was an oppositional relationship with the style that they were not. Further, it appeared to me that the youth made a distinction between purchasing an item for its look and purchasing an item for the associative properties of its brand name. Very few of the participants admitted to consuming brand names, but rather stated that they consumed the look. Finally, “quality” was repeatedly cited as a primary motivation for consuming particular commodities. Commentaries on the material quality of the product seemed to legitimize consumption choices while quashing insinuations of conformist shopping tendencies, as well as justifying the high cost of products.

These three simple concepts expanded into more elaborate narratives by which various “interpretive communities” (Radaway, 1991) understood, described and defended their cultural composition. Interpretive communities are social groupings that collectively

negotiate their comprehension of the broader cultural landscape in which they are immersed. Often these collectivities are formed along various social trajectories such as racial, ethnic, and/or gender determinations. Throughout the conversations, it became apparent that these cultural accounts were not concrete and automatic, but rather required “cultural work” (Eliasoph, 1997), in that they were continuously negotiated in accordance with the dynamics of the members of each group. As such, these concepts in their elaborated form seem to provide an excellent point of departure from which to examine youth fashion cultures.

The manner in which young women implement the notion of comfort differs markedly from that of young men. Whereas young women were prepared to recognize that their consumption choices were to a large extent influenced by fashion ideals, young men were much more likely to guard themselves against such admissions. In a group of female synchronized swimmers, Sharon comments that fashion supercedes comfort,

Like everyday. . . . Like shoes and stuff. . . obviously, like, you see everyone wearing huge heels and stuff, if you had a choice, which one’s more comfortable? It’s running shoes. But you’re not going to wear running shoes with your skirt.

Within the group, there is consensus that “Fashion is always number one,” as Judy re-affirms Sharon’s statements. Conversely, there are subtle differences in the accounts offered by young men as they tend not to be as candid with regards to the influences of fashion within their lives, rather referring to more individualistic consumption tendencies

based on notions of quality and physical comfort. Fiar, in an all-male conversation, states that,

Personally, when I go shopping, like say I go to the mall, if I see something I like. . . I will buy it. And I don't know [Pause]. . . well these pants, I don't think I've ever seen them before. I bought them from the Gap because I like the feel of them and I like how they look. And two weeks later I went back to buy a pair for my friend and they were sold out world wide...

Later in the conversation, Nick continues his comments, this time with respect to popular skateboarding fashions; "West Beach and Billabong and all that, they're very fashion designed, but they've kind of thought things through and they make them very, very quality." Dave adds; "Oh yeah, quality definitely!" Finally Rob sums up the appeal of the labels he wears, attributing it to: "Quality and comfort."

Although the young men in the preceding dialogue do admit that they buy fashionable labels (including the Gap and all the sign-value that surrounds that shopping experience, regardless of the absence of a readily visible label), their confessions are tempered by referring to the quality and comfort of the garment, as though this may be the first and foremost consideration. The comments made by the young men seem to indicate that they are very individualistic in their consumption choices. This point will be addressed later in the section, Gender Narratives.

Distinctions in the usage of the consumer-related concepts of comfort, quality and look are detected according to consumer location, including such discernable social

indicators as class, ethnicity and geographical location. Most notably who admitted that they could not afford the “the television trends,” manipulated the very same concepts in an effort to defend their style. One participant stated of expensive fashion trends that “Even if I could [afford them], you know, they don’t look good.” This sentiment was echoed repeatedly in other groups as young people stated that if they had more money, they probably would not change where they shopped or how they dressed. In essence, they were satisfied with their style and refused to acknowledge that the allure of the ever-evolving fashion cycle had captured their imagination. When asked if he would buy more clothes if he were in a different financial situation, Andrew, a 15 year-old youth who engaged in a conversational group at the Kenora Youth Center, replied “Well I would, but I wouldn’t start dressin’ any different. Maybe buy a pair of leather pants or something, become a biker.” Similarly, Hyco, also from Kenora, felt that if he had more money, he would “probably just buy more clothes from the Salvation Army.” Another young woman from the Kenora youth center defended her consumption choices by arguing “I have money. It’s not like I have to shop there. I can shop anywhere that I want to, but the Salvation Army, it’s cheaper, you get more.” By shifting the emphasis away from issues of money, the youth present their consumer habits as a matter of choice.¹ The alternative, to simply admit that their style choices are a reflection of an absence of finances, is to concede a degree of powerlessness that could be quite troublesome to their ego.

Indeed, issues of quality and comfort were also integral in legitimizing the style that they had managed to carve out for themselves in the face of real or perceived financial barriers. Shelia commented of the Salvation Army: “If you spend like two hours in there,

you can find, like, really good clothes.” Later in the conversation, she continues by saying that the “Army” clothes are really comfortable especially “if they are already worn in.” Shelia creatively employs the notions of comfort and quality to establish the virtues of her particular consumption style. Implicitly, second hand, worn-in clothes, are contrasted with brand new, crisp clothes that cost more and, according to Shelia, are not as comfortable.

What is interesting about this is how youth from very different social locations are able to use the same concepts, nevertheless infusing them with their own unique articulations, to verbally present themselves in everyday conversation. If we were to believe, as some social theorists would have us do (Ewen, 1976), that style is passively absorbed according to the meanings inscribed into commodities at the production level, then we would miss the complex constructions that are enacted at the level of the individual and his or her social community. John Fiske (1989) addresses this frequent oversight commenting that,

Popular culture is always in process; its meanings can never be identified in a text, for texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in inter-textual relations. (p. 3)

As has been shown in the preceding paragraphs, through the usage of the three inter-related concepts of comfort, quality and look, different interpretive communities have been able to invert and deflect many of the messages perpetuated by mainstream media. By way of conversation, young people splice media messages with their everyday

lived circumstances such that they are able to make sense of their styles and effectively communicate that style to those around them. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the three themes re-occur throughout the conversations, therefore I felt that a quick analysis of how they were utilized was necessary before continuing.

In his investigation into youth consumption of athletic shoes, Miles (1996) hypothesized that “the vast majority of training shoes purchased. . . were bought as ‘fashion’ rather than ‘functional’ items” (p. 147). I would argue on the basis of my research that the distinction between ‘function’ and ‘fashion’ is externally imposed and somewhat arbitrary. The young people involved in my conversations went to great lengths to describe the comfort and quality of the items they purchased, two very tangible and functional aspects of the commodity. Even though I think someone could argue, somewhat accurately, that the youth were merely defending their fashion choices against insinuations of consumer conformity, there is no reason to believe that appeals to comfort and quality are false or invalid motivations for consuming a particular brand. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the particular brand names and the fashions associated with those names are “functional” within the communities inscribing them with meaning. As will be shown in the section that follows, certain marks serve to delineate various affective communities, thus enabling individuals to form and display their identities. Beyond this function, the conversations to which I was witness emphasized the role athletic apparel played in signifying a healthy, vital personality. Although my research ostensibly supports Miles’ findings, I found that the youth were more articulate when it came time to discuss the function of various brand names.

Sports Consumption, Identities and Boundary Maintenance

Negotiated Identities: The Tribal Experience

I would argue that race and ethnicity play an integral role in youth identity. I would suggest that as both a conceptual category and an experienced social construct, youth come to identify with, and against, particular racial and ethnic categories. It is important to understand that within the auspices of consumption, the conceptual foundations of these categories are not necessarily fixed and stable, but are more likely to be in a state of perpetual formation. Willis (1990) speaks to this phenomenon, hypothesizing that “memberships of race, class, gender, age and region are not only learned, they’re lived and experimented with” (p. 12). In some cases these memberships or boundaries may even be transgressed, although only partially and incompletely, as Malik (1997) reminds us. To argue that the consumer can achieve complete metamorphosis through the consumption of a different identity is to ignore the fact that “society has systemically racialized certain social groups and signified them as different” (p. 117). From the interviews I conducted, I shall try to recount how race and ethnicity were constructed and circulated within the groups, and the very real impacts these negotiations had on their everyday lives.

Youth belonging to particular groups, or to what Maffesoli (1991) would call “tribes,” are demarcated, informed by and policed according to hybridized narratives encompassing both the messages of mainstream media, as well as the tactics and quotidian manipulations of these messages by the members of the group. These dynamics could be witnessed in an all-male group of upper middle-class youth from the well-to-do

cottage country of Lake of the Woods. The conversation had brought us to the topic of National Hockey League jerseys, and we were discussing who wears them and why.

Rick: I think again, if I was wearing it, like if I saw a huge Black guy wearing a hockey jersey, I'd be, "Hey, nice job." Like I couldn't wear it.

Ted: Why couldn't you wear it?

Rick: Haven't you seen that style of people wearing jerseys?

Ted: Yeah.

Rick: Yeah, there's a style of people doing it...

Rob: Rapper.

Rick: Rapper, yeah. If you can pull it off, you look good doing it. If you don't, you're just a scrawny little white boy from Winnipeg.

Ted: A wanna be? Is that fair to say?

Rick: Yeah, a wanna be.

As the conversation progresses it returns to the same topic of race and perceived fashion parameters:

Rob: FUBU is not me. It's like rapper, or wanna be rapper, and I don't wanna be, or look like a rapper, so I don't wear it.

Ted: What do you think of all those white guys that try and wear that rapper stuff?

Rob: I don't know. Some guys can get away with it, but a lot of them just look idiots. I guess if they really like it and they really want to be a rapper, then yeah, they can wear it.

Rick: I disagree. If you're wearing FUBU and you're White. . . I don't think you can do it. I don't think so.

Rob: Neither do I! [Laughs]

Rick: I mean the name says it all. You can't do it. . . But I mean if you've got friends who are into that and you wear it, whatever, I'm not going to say "You're an idiot!" I go to bars in Winnipeg, I go out at night, and I'm like "Man, you can't be doing that." It doesn't do it.

What is notable in this dialogue is the degree to which racial styles dictate what clothing is appropriate for this group of white youth. Obviously, not all white kids would be in agreement with the parameters this group has placed on their own style. Nevertheless, to these youth, fashion styles and race are linked in such a manner that to transcend these boundaries would most certainly elicit peer pressure from the group. The verbal policing of racial fashion barriers becomes transparent when Rob ostensibly comments that people are free to consume what they want. He states that, "I guess if they [white kids] really want to be a rapper, then yeah, they can wear it." Another member of the conversation interjects stating that there are styles for whites and styles for blacks and the two should not be crossed. Rob agrees, amending his original statement. Initially, Rob had made it sound as though it was up to the individual to construct his identity in any manner he wanted within the theatre of consumption. However, the statements that he

later makes indicate that he only believes this in theory, not in practice, as he infers that consumption is more or less bound by racial trajectories. This theme re-occurs in many of the conversations. The participants want to believe that there are no confines on how they dress, that they are free to express themselves through the array of commodities on the market, but in reality, they are continuously susceptible to the panoptic gaze of their peer group. Furthermore, they in turn are culpable for the continuance of the panoptic gaze.

I find it interesting that what the youth perceive as belonging to black rapper culture are hockey jerseys exhibiting National Hockey League logos, an institution almost entirely composed of white hockey players, coaches and owners. Although the League itself has little to do with black culture, in everyday practices the jerseys have been reinscribed to embody meanings quite inconsistent with those witnessed in the NHL. Outside of the League, in the context of daily life, the jerseys symbolically represent “rapper” culture, which is synonymous with black culture in the minds of the respondents. Michel DeCerteau (1984) might regard these alternative readings as a “tactic” or a “ruse” enacted by the consumer through the utilization of the materials of the producer in the process of making the “text habitable” (p. xxi). In other words, the author/reader may “select fragments taken from the vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them” (p. 35).² These “new stories” are obviously pervasive enough that they inform the fashion sense of white youth. However, it remains indeterminate as to what degree the impressions of the white youth, which envisage hockey jerseys as part of black rapper culture, serves to further establish and immortalize the sentiment that this style is indistinguishable from race.

Boundary Maintenance: The Verbal Policing of Identity

Ideas of how race and fashion intersect and how boundaries are maintained and policed were also evident within a series of conversations that included young Iranian men and women at the North York YMCA. It was during these conversations that I was introduced to an acronym which this community had apparently coined, and repeatedly leveled at one another. FOB, meaning Fresh Off the Boat, refers to the relative lack of style an individual possesses. The insult of course has terms of usage that are known and readily explained by the members of the Persian community. First, the severity of the insult ranges depending on the context of delivery and reception. Between friends, it is a mild knock meant to point out a momentary lapse in fashion taste, while between enemies it gains more potency. Second, the term is to be used amongst people of colour, or at least people that are relatively new to Western culture. For instance, Sarah states that, "Persians, we made it up, right, the Persian people, and then we used it for other people like black people, and now they use it." It appears as though the term is occasionally used condescendingly to refer to the style of a white person, but technically it refers to people "who came to Canada on the boat," from "Iran to Canada." The final criterion of its usage is that it never be directed from a white person to a person of colour. When I asked a group of Persian males if it would be acceptable for a white guy to call a Persian a FOB, their response was emphatic. In a heated furor, the group passionately yelled comments such as "Better not unless they want to get their asses kicked!" While others screamed that they would get "murdered," "brutified" and even "stabbed."

The meanings that FOB acquires are contextual, and can only be accurately assessed at the moment of deployment. However, as nearly as those within the

conversation could describe, it means that their Persian peers “are not in fashion.” It infers that they have just arrived in Canada and thus have not adapted to the new culture. It could easily be assumed from such statements that the ideal for the recently immigrated Iranian people would be to whole-heartedly embrace Western culture. However, more intricate readings of their statements reveal that they have creatively enmeshed their own native culture with that of Western culture to form a unique hybridized version. Far from regarding white Canada to be the standard against which to measure their own cultural adaptation, the Persian community discursively coerces against becoming too white. During one of the conversations, I asked them to describe the term “player.” I was quickly castigated for my lack of understanding of this language, as one participant asks, “You don’t know what a player is?” To which I indicated that I did not, and he laughingly states, “Boy you really are white!” To be described as a “white boy” is not merely an innocuous account of one’s skin colour, but rather is meant to characterize an individual that is overly prosaic in both demeanor and style. Whites are understood to be prudish types when it comes to fashion and character according to the stories recounted by the Persian participants.

Although the Persian respondents did envision themselves culturally to be more akin to blacks, their portrayals of the similarities were two-sided as they also worked to reveal the distinctions between the two races. The group was in agreement that they identify with blacks more than they do whites remarking that “we are closer to blacks than we are to whites ‘cause blacks are from the ghetto too.” An experiential bond is established on the basis of a shared material poverty.³ To accentuate the disparity between Persians and whites, one young man commented that “You can call me black,

but I would get pissed if you called me white.” However, during the conversations, boundaries between blacks and Persians were articulated via fashion, violence and inter-racial relationships. All of these issues will be addressed later, but for now, suffice to say that the members of the Persian community with whom I spoke each had very lucid notions of their racial identity; eliding, incorporating and maintaining aspects of other racial communities as well as their own.

Fashionable Violence and Boundary Maintenance

In many of the conversations, fashion and violence seemed to occupy a catalytic type of relationship to one another; violence often defining and authenticating the racial significance of the fashion in the consciousness of the youth, with the reverse being equally true. This phenomenon is most recognizable with respect to the mythology surrounding the highly controversial brand name FUBU. The name alone, For Us By Us (“Us” referring to black people), ignites much contention. A mixture of fear and perceived exclusion combined to make the garment un-wearable to many of the respondents. However, others were able to skillfully construct the commodity with a more intimate appeal by subjecting it to their own localized narrative. Two of the all-white groups rejected the clothing outright, choosing to understand it according to its chosen title. For example, Amanda, a member of an all-female synchronized swimming team, remarks of FUBU that it is;

kind of like a . . . this sounds bad. . . but it’s kind of like a black version of Tommy Hilfiger, ‘cause it’s directed more so for people that . . . like the

people that listen to rap music and stuff like that. Because everybody that endorses these clothes are like people that are rappers or people that are black...

Music, fashion clothing and race are all conjoined in this testimony such that the commodity is rendered ineffectual to the identity of this speaker. Rick, as quoted earlier in this section, echoes these sentiments commenting that “the name says it all. . . you can’t do it.” Obviously Rick is not referring to some physical barrier that prevents the consumer from wearing the label itself, but it might as well be, as far as he is concerned FUBU is a black fashion. Both of the preceding quotes interpret the meanings of FUBU such that the commodity is understood to be associated with blackness and therefore culturally unavailable to non-blacks.

Others, however, have worked to overcome the title of the clothing such that it becomes wearable within their community. A Native respondent from the Kenora youth drop-in center explained how his brother is a “FUBU addict.” When confronted about the title of the clothing, Lawson’s brother explains that if the chosen name of the company were truly exclusionary it would be entitled “For Us Blacks Only.” Furthermore, according to Lawson, his brother not only wears the clothing but embraces the Black culture associated with the fashion adopting both an appropriate walk and talk to accompany the apparel. Others are not nearly so calculating in their justifications for wearing FUBU, but rather simply cite the basic tenets of the freedom of expression; “I don’t care about who is FUBU. If I like it, I’ll wear it. . . if it’s the style, I’ll wear it.”

This respondent reputedly sets himself outside the fashion confines that are expressed according to the peer pressures of the group.

The deterrents to crossing racially-defined fashion barriers extend beyond internal ridicule from the group membership can often be enforced by members of other racially-defined fashion communities. Violence and verbal chastisement from those trying to defend the borders of their fashion community were two recurrent fears expressed by the youth. One Persian respondent explained how fashion borders are verbally policed both internally and externally:

you don't wear FUBU because a Black guy can dis you for wearing it. He can be like "That's mine, you don't wear it." A Persian guy can dis you, like "That's a Black guy's, you don't wear it."

However, the tangible threat of violence, whether real or perceived, seems to be a far greater source of apprehension associated with the transgressions of established barriers. An exchange between two Persian youth reflects the foreboding relationship youth have with the marks that are not consistent with their community, most notably, FUBU. Sarah notes of FUBU that "We do touch it [wear it], but like I don't want to go somewhere where there's these big guys." Nathan complements this remark, "Like if you go to, like, New York neighborhoods and if you wear it, they would beat you up." When asked if you had to go to New York to experience such hostility, or are there areas in Toronto such as the corner of Jane and Finch, where they would be uncomfortable wearing FUBU, the participants agreed that there are such areas. Interestingly, the Native

youth from the Kenora drop-in center also expressed similar anxieties, despite the reality that his community is located in a region that has almost no Black population. Kyle also spoke of some place other than his home town when describing the worries associated with FUBU: “you go down there with a FUBU shirt, and, ahh, you walk by a Black person, right [indicates a punching motion with his hand]. . . “That’s For Us,” you know, “It’s By Us so it’s For Us.” Each of these descriptions refers to an “elsewhere community” (Canner, 1997). When recounting their fears, the youth do not perceive the peril of violence to be at home, but rather somewhere else. It appears that the distant threat of violence may very well be a central component in the pleasure and allure of FUBU.

FUBU was not the only brand name that had been territorialized by certain communities. Many of the groups spoke of particular brand names as belonging to different races. Several conversation groups demonstrated a very categorical sensibility as they attributed various brands to particular racial groupings. Paym, a Persian male, explains that “Jamaicans wear FUBU, Persians, Iranians. . . they all wear Adidas. . . Ginos usually wear Adidas and Cappa, and like CK, Guess and Tommy. . . everybody has a different style, that’s why they are all categorized.” Members within other groups demonstrated similar competencies at defining which race identified with which name. It was debatable to what degree the Persian community would go to protect their symbols, Adidas and Fila. One younger respondent, age 14, comments that if black people started wearing Adidas in a Persian community, the “Iranian people would go beat them up.” However, a female participant takes issue with this comment suggesting that the Persian’s do not say “Oh that’s our mark, don’t wear it!” Regardless of whether forceful

maintenance of racial fashion symbols is real or imagined, it is instructive to witness the adequacy and consistency with which the youth identify their social location as it is rooted and expressed in brand names, as well as comprehending the position of ethnic Others.

Obviously, another very real limitation to one's ability to express one's identity via consumption is money, or more importantly, the lack of it. An interesting and heated exchange between two Persian males demonstrates how money factors into the ability to consume; Wayne comments of Elias that "The only reason you don't wear FUBU is because you can't afford it! That's the thing." Elias emphatically responds by listing the FUBU products he owns; "I have a \$400 FUBU jacket, I have a FUBU jacket! I have two FUBU shirts. . . !" Wayne then points out the difference between Elias having FUBU in his possession and actually purchasing FUBU; "You can't afford FUBU! You can steal FUBU but you can't afford it!" Elias defends his style against the verbal attack by commenting, "I got FUBU, it doesn't matter where I got it from, I got FUBU." This debate poignantly reveals the cost of the garment to be one of the status-inscribing properties of brand name fashions. Essentially, the argument revolves around whether the label itself embodies the prestige, or does the social value emanate from the ability to buy the commodity. One side arguing that where it came from is irrelevant to the significance of the label, while the other side feels that actually possessing the money to purchase the item is an essential aspect of the name itself.

Brett, in a different conversation, asks the group; "When you think of all these rich boys at our school, how come they don't wear Tommy Hilfiger?" Later he answers his own question,

I asked them; “Why do you dress like that if your parents are millionaires?”
And they go; [Demonstrating, he snaps his fingers] “Who am I going to impress?”

To the young Persian, who admittedly has little spare money to consume expensive brand names, this proves to be perplexing. An attempt at describing why those with money do not consume clothes with very noticeable labels was made by the youth in northwestern Ontario, Lake of the Woods area. Fiar explains,

I’ve found in Winnipeg a lot of. . . it sounds bad. . . but lower class people all now wear Tommy, and all the. . . I don’t want to say higher class kids. . . but, are kinda almost switched roles. Like, five years ago, all the higher class wore higher class clothes, and now they’ve kind of switched, like lower class is catching up and then we’ve. . . higher class kids have already made a style change because of YM magazines and stuff like that. . . And then it just takes longer to filter down through the lines and then they get it. And by then we’ve already made a style change, so they’re always trying to keep up.⁴

Fiar appears to be describing what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) would likely identify as “distinction,” whereby members of a particular habitus demarcate and secure their collective identity through their distinctive use of various signifiers, in this case clothing. However, there are two inconsistencies in Fiar’s deposition that require further address and elaboration. First, is the assumption that the “lower class kids” want to emulate the

fashions of their more affluent peers. As has already been demonstrated, the Persian kids who had diminutive finances were not overly impressed with the styles of their rich peers. Rather, they had their own style, which they enjoyed, and verbally defended against any suggestions of lack of fashion sense. Second, flows of style are not unidirectional, and do not necessarily ooze from the wealthier echelons of society down to the poorer segments. Indeed, it has been ascertained in other studies, and confirmed through this research, that often the street look becomes the trend which youth from all elements of society seek to emulate. The group of males from the Lake of the Woods recognized and commented on this aspect of fashion trends. Rick speaks of the approval Tommy Hilfiger fashion achieved through its acceptance by black people; "Black people brought his fashion to the street, they made it the look." However, I think it would be presumptuous to assume that all fashions associated with the street, or rather with the exotic or marginal, are transformed into mainstream commodities. Equally erroneous would be to assume that all fashions that originate on the street become the trend for the middle-class, bourgeoisie youth. Rather, I would suggest that styles are fastidiously pieced together in a *bric-à-brac* manner by the youth in correspondence with the negotiated parameters of the particular community with which the youth associate. These styles emerge from all sectors of youth culture, are commodified in the market system, and then are infused with meanings coinciding with the constitution of the interpretive community. To accurately isolate from which subculture the style emerged is an arduous, and very possibly, futile exercise.

The Political Economy of Sports Consumption

Wealth and the Label

Returning to the issue that opened this section, I think it essential that this most counter-intuitive use of symbols, or rather non-symbols or minimally subtle use of symbols, be investigated further. The Persians that participated in the discussion groups readily acknowledged that if money were not a limiting factor, they would consume more of the name brands that they identified with, Tommy Hilfiger being a primary example. This response can be contrasted with the upper middle-class white youth, who specifically targeted “Tommy” as something they wouldn’t wear because of the audacity of the labeling. One participant comments, “Would I wear ah. . . big labels. You know, Tommy Wear, like Tommy’s written all over it. That’s like Nike. I don’t wear stuff like that. I like simple, like plain things.” According to these accounts, it appears as though those that can least afford to wear expensive labels are most likely to indulge in highly presentable name brands. One participant from the Kenora youth center identified this phenomenon, commenting, “a lot of times people who wear name brand clothes don’t have a lot of money.” It is possible that this tendency to consume name brands that are conspicuously flamboyant arises out of the need to display one’s identity through consumption with relatively little money, therefore, making it necessary that the most impressionable impact be made with the few clothes that are consumed. Rick addresses this phenomenon,

I've always had the money to buy like a wide variety of things. Like I could wear the Tommy, I could wear the Gap preppie clothing, I can dip into each pile if I wanted to. . . but when you have a limited amount of funds you might pick one to stick to. "I gotta buy only Tommy, this is where I want to be! Save up my money and buy that \$80 shirt."

What I understand Rick to be saying is that because of the inability to buy all sorts of labels, the intensity of the commodities they do consume is exaggerated to achieve the desired effect of expression of identity. One speaker from the Persian community agrees with Rick's statements in intention, as he expressed that white people are somewhat able to consume whatever they want providing they do not breach the established codes of their own communities. In other words, the listings of who belongs to what brand name did not include references to white folks. This begs the question as to whether lack of money is responsible for the fashion boundaries that cohere to racial trajectories? Was the type of militant protecting of fashion codes consistent amongst races from all economic spheres of society? Obviously, the scope of such projections is beyond the capabilities of this study, but interesting none the less.

The impact of money, whether it be the lack or abundance of, was a theme that underlay all of the conversations. What was apparent throughout these discussions was that money impacts in a fundamental way upon the consciousness of the individual as to their social location. In the case of the middle-class youth, issues of wealth were implicitly expressed via the material environment within which the discussions took place, and could further be noticed within the clothes they wore and the commodities at

their disposal. Conversely, for the participants with less material wealth, money as a pervasive consideration in everyday life, repeatedly occupied the forefront of the discussion. These dramatically differing perspectives were instrumental in influencing the social groupings the individual frequented, and thus informing the style, or styles, through which they expressed their identity.

In conclusion, what is evidenced in the previous paragraphs is that young people are able to verbally articulate themselves, and the Other, through reference to mass-marketed commodities according to the meanings they consume and attribute to these products. Willis (1990) speaks to this phenomenon commenting that young people “use style in their symbolic work to express and develop their understanding of themselves as unique persons, to signify who they are, and who they think they are” (p. 89). Miles (1996) elaborates on this point suggesting that the development of identity is not a solitary project, but rather, “individuality, as much as it exists, appears to be peculiarly dependent upon cultural commonalities established between peers” (p. 150). Through their narratives, young consumers, along with their peers, manoeuvre to paint the prefabricated commodity with a significance that styles it such that it is valuable in demarcating one tribal grouping from the next. Fiske (1989) understands the materials of popular culture to be a perpetual “struggle for meanings” (p. 4) where the consumers complement the manufactured messages of the commodity by infusing their own essence, thus forming it as a valuable signifier in their daily realities.

One should note that my research privileged the verbal medium, whereby participants within the conversation were able to construct and present their identities through words, as opposed to observing their performative habits. Of the narrative

process, Michel de Certeau (1984) submits that “every story. . . is a spatial practice” (p. 115), whereby the narrator invests the social order with their own nuances and unique understandings. In this sense, stories describe the objective world through the subjective eyes of the speaker such that their version of reality becomes palpable. Further, stories seek to situate the speaker, fellow speakers, the audience, and the world at large into some sort of cognitive scheme. According to de Certeau, a fundamental aspect of this task is the discursive creation of the “bridge” and the “frontier.” Commenting of stories, he writes

that the primary function is to *authorize* the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits, and as a consequence, to set in opposition, within the field of discourse, two movements that intersect (setting and transgressing limits) in such a way as to make the story a sort of “crossword” decoding stencil (a dynamic partitioning of space). (p. 123)

Within the conversations, divisions between various social groupings were continuously assembled and re-assembled in connection with the dynamics of the group. The individual, with reference to his or her peer group (both present and not), would verbally define the self, while simultaneously labouring to construct the Other, and what distinguishes the two. However, these markings were not total and unrelenting, but rather, were continuously breached and re-negotiated. Social coordinates such as race, age, locality, gender and money repeatedly surfaced within the conversations as topics that were not only asserted, but also experimented with. In Maffesoli’s version of postmodern

society, everyday routines are transgressing traditional “socio-professional categories,” making contemporary forms of sociality more akin to the “practice of networks” (p. 12). Despite the fact that the various collectivities could verbally establish boundaries between themselves and the Other, this did not preclude the sharing, borrowing and transferring of cultural symbols amongst the clusters. All of these processes occur in affirmation of what Maffesoli refers to as the “thematic of attraction” whereby “attractions and repulsions map onto the chart of a complex social astronomy, where, under the apparent divergences of personal and tribal projects, one can find codes, rules and restrictive customs” (p. 13).

Experimentation with identity within the field of consumption is always mediated by the reality of one’s life circumstances. Malik (1997) remains apprehensive towards postmodern theories that speak of “multiple social identities,” which tend to dissolve “social relations such as racial oppression” down to “personal attributes, or even lifestyle choices” (p. 115). He continues,

If we could choose identities in the way we choose our clothes every morning, if we could erect social boundaries from a cultural Lego pack, then racial hostility might be no different from disagreements between lovers of Mozart and those who prefer Charlie Parker. . . In other words, racial differences would not be *social relations* which exist apart from the preferences of any given individual. They would simply represent prejudices born out of a plurality of tastes. (p. 116)

Malik is attempting to remind us that issues such as race and class and other social factors are not merely enacted by the individual, but to a large degree imposed. For Malik, racism is a reality that people are forced to confront and not merely some discursively constructed artifact that one chooses to consume. He continues in commenting that the unique cultural forms constructed by racial communities are “not the cause of racial identification” but rather “its product” (p. 117). Although Malik’s points are justified, his assertions are perhaps taken to extremes. His assumption that racially-defined communities cohere on the basis of a systemic racism probably has much validity. However, to establish this as the only factor, to the exclusion of so many other influences, I would argue is unfounded and overly authorial. The participants from racially-based communities that took part in my research were aware of systemic barriers that impacted on their everyday lives, and this undoubtedly influenced their style. However, it would be nearly impossible for me to discern to what degree these styles originated out of a genuine reaction to social circumstance as opposed to pleasurable experimentation.

Brand Name and Nike

Almost without exception, the young people who took part in the conversations recognized that when they consumed a name brand they were paying for the mark that renders it distinguishable from other commodities, and thus associatively having the same effect on the consumer’s identity. It would be a grave mistake to assume that these young consumers are overwhelmed and duped by the marketing messages that barrage them daily. Rather, their responses indicate that they are very cognizant of the capitalist forces

that underlie the goods they consume. In order to assuage the impacts this realization might have on their conscience, a multitude of methods are employed in an attempt to maintain both an appearance of autonomy and an internal sense of individuality. What transpires in the following paragraphs is an exploration into how youth simultaneously criticize the labels they identify with while continuing to wear them and defend their legitimacy.

A revealing exchange between two participants illustrates the precarious location in which the consumer finds themselves as they attempt to navigate between the influences of their peers, market pressures and their own perceptual bearings. One remarks that “I don’t like supporting some, you know brand, just so they can make money.” To which his friend replies, “That’s why you don’t look good.” Despite his refutation of the financial motivations underlying brand names, his friend retorts that this explains his lack of style. Another speaker makes similar comments stating that “If you wear a shirt without it, like, just nothing, but if it’s got the small Nike stuff they say ‘Oh nice shirt’.” Subsequently, in the conversation, the same speaker indicates that you are “paying for that” type of response from your peers. In both instances, the speakers are aware that the name is essential to the social appeal of the product, and that this association between image and material commodity proves financially lucrative for the company.

However, when dealing with the younger participants (age 12-13), such revelations about the market’s role within the name brand were not automatically indicated. Rather the respondents referred to the social seduction of the sign. One 13 year-old boy, when asked if his hat would look good without the Nike swoosh, explained that “if it doesn’t

have nothing on it then it won't look good." Similar sentiments were expressed by a 12 year-old Native boy from Kenora.

Kyle: See that hat you are wearing? That kind of hat is sort of for cheesy people.

Ted: Which this hat? [My hat] You don't like that hat?

Kyle: No, I like it, I'd wear it. . . I'd wear it if it was a Nike hat.

Ted: Why is that Kyle? What do you mean?

Kyle: Like, I don't know, it's just kind of weird. . . it's goofy.

This exchange proves to be quite instructive and issues a number of crucial themes. For instance, not only does the Nike symbol make the clothing, but it also is instrumental in defining the person. It is not merely the presence of the Nike swoosh that would make the hat, and those that wear it, cool, but the absence of the swoosh renders the hat unfashionable, something that "cheesy people" would wear. Finally, Kyle is unable to make the link between the sign and the associative market value of the sign (or at least he does not do so in this conversation), rather he resorts to describing the hat through the ambiguous discourse of fashion, labeling it as "goofy" and "weird." Consistent with the results of other studies, the younger participants did not seem to display the consumer literacy or the cynicism towards the name brands that the older respondents exhibited.

Regardless of whether the participants within the various conversations recognized the capitalist underpinnings of the names they consumed, there was a certain degree of automaticity in the manner with which they talked about their fashions. In other words,

the dialogue revolved around and was structured by certain assumptions about fashion that seemingly were not consciously apparent to the speaker. When Nathan was asked to describe what names his friends wore he responded that they wore, “Nike, Adidas. . . anything.” However, when pressed to describe “anything,” it became obvious that he did not in fact mean “anything,” but rather had in mind very specific labels. Sarah, a member of the same group, reveals her criteria for the clothes she wears commenting “As long as it’s the clothes and it looks nice.” Again, this abstract and indeterminate notion of “looks nice” emerges as the ingredient that establishes the fashion ensemble of the individual. However, Sarah does refer to “the clothes” and not just “clothes” which implies that there may be more to her statement than initially was thought. This suspicion is later confirmed through the comments of Luke, a rather demure member of the group. When he was asked what names his friends wore, he responded, “I dunno, they won’t really tell me anything.” To which I asked, “Do you notice the labels on people’s clothes?” Somebody else answers the question for him stating that of course he does, “He’s not a FOB.” To his peers, it is obvious that he recognizes the labels on clothes, he is not a FOB, or ignorant of fashions. What this lengthy recital has attempted to demonstrate is that young people talking about the labels in and through which they come to see themselves is not necessarily an elementary task. Indeed, to speak of labels at the most miniscule level is like discussing the air we breathe. Many taken-for-granted assumptions organize the social dynamics of the group, such that their understandings of the labels that symbolize their identity become very difficult to recognize and discuss.

Another indication of the hegemony that these signs assume in the lives of young people can be found in reference to Nike. For instance my mispronunciation of Nike

(pronouncing the “e” softly rather than the more common Nike-e) often was corrected explicitly or altered implicitly during the conversation. When speaking to youth from the Kenora youth centre, I was twice chastised for pronouncing Nike with a soft “e.” Clearly, to the young male who was issuing the censure, my linguistic inaccuracy proved to be disruptive of his cultural milieu. In other conversations, the members simply went about using the name Nike-e. Fiar, responded to my inquiry as to whether he wore Nike (short “e”) or not, answered that he has never worn Nike-e (long “e”). Notwithstanding his claim not to wear Nike-e, he was well enough versed with the commodity to have acquired a preference for pronouncing it with a hard “e,” despite my referral to Nike (with a soft “e”) when asking the question. Not only does the icon of the infamous swoosh colonize our everyday lives, but so does the vernacular surrounding Nike.

The Nike mystic has several contradictory narratives that differentially speak of the label, the quality of the products and the various products manufactured. The young men and women involved in the conversations simultaneously celebrated and attacked Nike. While the sign-value of the swoosh had reached a level of social acceptance that was almost beyond reproach, it seemed more likely that criticisms of Nike would be leveled at the material quality and high cost of the products. For example, Kelly stated that the “Quality of Nike is coming down. . . badly.” To which her conversational peers agreed, and various stories surfaced as to the poor quality of Nike products. Regardless of their admonitions about the quality of Nike products, the success of the label occupies a separate front. For instance, Millen reports that “people think of Nike as one of the best companies, the styles they have, and Adidas too. But Reebok, ah Fila, all these other companies are going down.” Shortly thereafter, Brett affirms the sentiments of Millen by

referring to Nike as a style power-horse that will never be surpassed. He comments that “Nike is up there, Nike is going to stay up there for a while.” What is occurring in the preceding dialogue is an unraveling of the concept of “quality” which was used by so many to defend their style choices. In the case of Nike, for these young consumers, the quality of the product is superceded by the sign-value of the swoosh, an admission that could undoubtedly have repercussions on their sense of individuality as consumers. Stuck in the position of having to choose between consuming quality and image, many of the participants opted for image, but this did not prevent them from attacking the material integrity of the products underlying those images.

The participants cited in the previous paragraph were not alone: other groups expressed similar convictions. During the conversation with the synchronized swimmers, the group was split as to the quality of Nike. One respondent charged that Nike is “not quality. As, like, a runner, I have never had a good pair.” Of the eight participants, there were two who objected to this statement. Nevertheless, the criticisms of Nike became more intricate as the speakers began to criticize the research that went into the production of the shoe, knowledge the retail staff possess about the shoe, and the degree to which the Nike guarantee stands behind the products. For example, one speaker stated that “they are so concerned with the cosmetics of the shoe rather than the actual design and how it fits and how it lasts.” This perspective was echoed by another member of the group who stated that “they are spending their money on the same kind of shoes, just getting different colours. . . they should be spending their money on getting different kinds of styles that will suit different people.” Aside from the concerns with the overall structure of Nike running shoes, they were also distressed by what they saw as incompetence of the

customer service employees at the retail outlets. Mockingly, Sherry paraphrases the logic motivating the staff of an athletic store that sells Nike,

And they always use the line “I had the shoe and it worked good.” Anything that’s selling really well they figure whatever is most popular and the most expensive; “I’ll just blow it up and say all the good qualities” . . . [With respect to Nike’s no-quibble refund policy, she continues,] Most people are too lazy to bring them back, and when they do bring them back, they find something that can’t refund the money for.

What is captured in the preceding excerpts is a remarkably scathing depiction of one of the pillars of the sport fashion industry. Far from being overcome with a media-induced bliss, most of the young commentators quoted above are weary of Nike’s quality and very cognizant of the contrived social status surrounding the swoosh.

Notwithstanding their attacks on the overall integrity of Nike and the industry that surrounds it, the participants indicated that Nike’s style maintained an unquestionable social status amongst their peers. Prior to the polemic of Nike, Amanda stated that Nike is,

like a fashion sports thing that everybody’s comfortable with. Like, if you want to buy, like, nice, umm, you go for running shoes. . . everybody’s comfortable with, like, in the sense where it’s OK to wear Nike. . . Like it’s cool, it’s in style...

In agreement with her statement, other participants indicated that nobody is going to make negative inferences such as “Oh, those are really ugly shoes” or suggest that “You probably got those at Bi-way.” According to these accounts, what Nike offers a commodified image such that social prestige is the purchasable entity, as opposed to a quality athletic running shoe. The speakers have exposed a fundamental discrepancy that regularly confronts them in their consumption routines. Are they to discount what they know of Nike’s quality and purchase them for style, or does their sagacious consumer awareness prevail and thus force them to choose brands of greater quality?

Another interesting testament to the pervasiveness of Nike within the consumer’s consciousness is found in the conversations with the girls from the Lake of the Woods area. They too were very critical of certain aspects of Nike’s product line, yet all told, Nike continued to be an essential ingredient within their fashion ensemble. The group oscillated from negative comments of Nike’s fashion and quality to acknowledging that some of Nike’s products were a staple in their daily fashions. The main complaint that the participants lodged against Nike was that they had expanded too quickly into a huge number of sports markets they knew little about. For example, one speaker comments that “Nike is too out of its league. . . Like it started with just a few sports, like every company had its own specific thing, like Bauer makes skates, right, and now Nike does totally everything.” To this, another member responds that “Nike skates are ugly.” The negative banter surrounding Nike’s quality and style continues, however, this comes shortly after the group had identified Nike shoes as an absolute necessity. Theresa states that Nike is “dying off” to which Jackie emphatically replies, “Except for shoes! Shoes!” Curiously, Jackie’s recollection of Nike shoes as an essential part of their athletic

repertoire awakens the group from their oversight. All except for one member begin to describe how they “need Nike Triax” for their feet. It seems to me that this sudden awakening to the necessity of Nike running shoes further exemplifies how successful Nike has been at colonizing the impulses of the consumer such that their fashion instincts are barely perceptible to themselves. Susan Willis (1993) refers to the invisibility of corporate commodities within our daily lives commenting that “logos have become so much a part of our cultural baggage that we hardly even notice them” (p. 132). However, the automaticity of the label is only arrived at through the diligence of corporate efforts that endeavor to seamlessly envelop an entire corner of the market. As can be witnessed in the preceding statements, the spontaneity of the corporate label is not automatic, but rather must be manufactured. For instance, the young women received Nike, the running shoe, differently than they did Nike, the hockey skate. What this indicates to me is that Nike has not yet had the time required in sport markets such as hockey and swimming to create the hegemony that they enjoy in their more established markets like that of running shoes.

This phenomenon was also evidenced in the comments of Lawson during a different discussion. When asked whether Nike is an athletic company or fashion, he replies “style.” When trying to justify his arguments he utilizes the same reference points commenting that “in hockey they have Nike helmets, skates and stuff like that.” To which I ask if that’s in fact style or is that equipment? Lawson continues, “sports equipment, but, Nike everything. Nike hockey stick and all that.” Lawson’s reasoning for understanding Nike to be an image-based corporation is not because of their running shoes, shirts, shorts, hats or any of the array of other products they market, but rather with

their most recent encroachment into hockey equipment. Lawson recognizes this as a peculiar territory for Nike and thus re-interprets what, for him, used to be an athletic label, as a corporation concerned with style. It is interesting that the newer, less familiar, territory of Nike is understood as style, whereas the more established Nike running shoe is regarded as having athletic function. Again we can witness the arbitrariness with which young people characterize what is not part of their fashion coordinates as “style,” whereas depicting their own consumer choices as rooted in function and utility.

According to these accounts, the diversification of Nike into other sporting milieus has had a splintering effect, whereby the label is interpreted differently depending on the sport market and interpretive community into which it is received. It is possible that this expansion into other sport markets has resulted in an erosion of the naturalness that was once associated with Nike running shoes. However, a majority of the members of the various groups, despite their initial denunciations, acknowledged that Nike continued to be an essential part of their shopping selections. Why is it that the speakers are able to concurrently denounce Nike’s quality and market motivations, yet continue to consume and portray the swoosh as a “comfortable” label that demarcates the product that they “need” for their feet. Miles (1996) suggests that the swoosh and other labels are crucial to both the identification and communication processes of young people. To disrupt this symbolic formation could potentially result in confusion and anxiety amongst the consumer. In his study, the young consumers

were not prepared to subvert the wider cultural values that were imparted in such goods for fear of undermining their own identity formation which was so readily tied up in cultural precedents. (p. 155)

Similar to Miles research, the current thesis has found that Nike occupies such a significant position within the sporting industry, that in many ways Nike has come to be synonymous with sport. Nike has entrenched itself as a meaningful symbol within the lives of consumers in general and young men and women in particular, largely through their endorsement contracts with sports superstars such as Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. Although the participants may critique the products they consume, total abandonment of them is unlikely as the social repercussions would be too serious. It would be destructive to one's patterns of identification as well as potentially socially alienating to verbally defile both the image and material content of Nike. The commodity and the meanings it gains both at the broader market level and at the local level are an essential reference point in the identity of young people.

The name brand of a commodity is a meaningful vessel that serves to communicate commonality between people, even amongst relative strangers. During a conversation with a younger group of Persian youth, I pointed out a Nike shirt that one of the participants was wearing. Immediately, the rest of the group excitedly proceeded to show me the Nike they were wearing. The fervor of this exhibitory exercise indicated the importance to the young members of being identified as one of those wearing Nike. Within this group, the swoosh had assumed a binding capacity, a point of similarity around which the members could cohere. A similar incident occurred in Kenora, when

one of the participants noticed that I was wearing a Point Zero shirt. For him, this proved to be a moment of connection, where he was effectively able to bridge the various cleavages that lay between us such as age, race, recording-recorded, etc. Once it was established that I in fact was wearing a Point Zero shirt, another member of the group joined in describing which Point Zero clothes he owned. For Maffesoli (1991), symbols are crucial in the forming of individual identities through the association with the collective; he comments that “I recognize a sign by recognizing it with others, and so I recognize what unites me to others” (p. 17). He continues to explain that “the function of a particular sign, or the collective emotion attached to a sign, can express itself through a piece of clothing, a habit, a taste” (p. 17). In the instances I have recounted, the youth were using Nike and Point Zero as a method of demonstrating who they were, hoping that the signs they used to relate to one another would be effective in presenting themselves to me.

Youth Perceptions of the Political Economy of the Sports Commodity

Similar to the explanations the young speakers provided with respect to brand names, their comprehension and critiques of the market forces underlying the commodities they consumed was pendulous in nature. Occasionally articulating micro-assaults against capitalism, such as verbally protesting the artificially inflated prices of Nike shoes, while at other moments defending the very logic of the system that enables this to occur. This continuous oscillation between contradictory statements ranging from consumer savvy censures towards adamant celebrations of the macro system is reflective of Langman’s (1992) “dialectic of empowerment-enfeeblement” and Fiske’s (1989)

scheme of “resistance” and “containment.” The young respondents are able to recognize and occasionally skirt the oppressive dimensions of a consumer society, while simultaneously being seduced and experiencing sentiments of helplessness. Although it may be possible for the consumer to resist against absolute subordination through the cunning use of trickery or ruse, ultimately it is impossible to “maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 95). What follows is a compilation of the voices of the youth as they describe and critique the commodities they consume; submit to and subvert the dominant meanings inscribed in those goods; and articulate the feelings of empowerment and enfeeblement that they confront as a result of their consumption experiences.

Probably the most striking inconsistency of the testimonies was the inability of the youth to locate their quandaries with respect to the commodity market into a more global scheme. In other words, their refutations of the economic forces that are omnipresent within commodities were almost without exception inspired by what appeared to be self-interest, such as price or quality. Representative of these apparently parochial sentiments towards the market was an exchange between two Persian males.

Brett: No, there made in China for, like, 90 cents and they sell them here for, like, \$200. You know how much profit they make? And Adidas, they were made by an Italian, and now it's all like China or something. I want Gucci. [Laughter]

Ted: What do you guys think about that, like, Nike made in China and stuff like that?

Millen: It's true...

Brett: I am true, you know that. . . I'm correct, people are stupid.

Millen: It is true. Even my parents have told me that too. It probably costs the company like \$4 to make. . . a shoe, a \$300 shoe and they sell it for like 150 times the price they make it for...

Ted: And that bothers you?

Millen: Yeah! It really ticks me off!

This brief exchange is a succinct overview of a number of the themes that re-occurred throughout the discussions. First, what really seems to enrage the discussants is the notion that the expensive shoes they are buying are made for a fraction of the cost. However, they are not as likely to take issue with the cheap labour and the exploitative working conditions, but rather berate the corporation for not passing these savings on to the consumer. Third, the knowledge of the inflated price of the shoes seems to be power in itself. In the mind of the speaker it distinguishes him or her from the Other, who is characterized as being "stupid" while senselessly continuing to consume the label without any knowledge of the artificially high prices. Finally, and probably the least common theme, was the notion of quality or authenticity. Brett speaks as though Adidas is a fallen company because it is now made in China as opposed to Italy where quality labels, such as Gucci, are made.

In a different discussion, Millen, along with four other Persian males, were probed to expand on their attitudes towards Nike and other companies with similar labour policies. When I raised the objections that Brett had made (see above dialogue) with respect to the high prices of shoes, there were two distinct responses from the group. One member of the group agreed, commenting that he wishes “there were a ghetto factory that sells the shoes for exactly the price” it was produced for. Regardless, of my seditious line of questioning that entailed a slight critique of the exploitative labour policies, this speaker selected from my question/statement the aspects that would benefit him most directly, namely lower prices. The conversation then became an inquiry into the motivations of Brett (who was not present). One speaker states that Brett’s comments are informed by his location as a relatively poor consumer. He states that Brett is “doing his business, his point of view would change if he was working for Nike.” Interpreting the perspective of the individual as motivated by nothing more than vested interests, John, in the previous statement, is coming to the defense of the most elementary tenets of capitalism. He then continues saying that, “If you worked for Nike, you wouldn’t say that. If you worked for the company, it would be like “You can charge them \$500, I don’t care.” When I point out that Brett neither works for Nike nor has the money or power to freely consume Nike and that these circumstances most certainly do impact his perspective, John responds by appealing to the mythology of the American Dream, commenting; “So that makes him try harder to get on top then. He has to try to get on the top.”

I will deal with the two distinct responses outlined in the preceding paragraph separately, first chronicling the self-interested attacks on the production and distribution

of consumer goods. In a more obtrusive manner, the participants from the Kenora youth centre reverberated the aforementioned mind-sets of those singularly concerned with the over-priced commodities. When asked if they knew about the exploitation of labourers in third-world countries, and did this awareness trouble them, their responses ranged from mild distress to complete indifference. One speaker comments that “I’m not buying their clothes just because of what they do. Like I don’t agree with what they do, but I do like the quality of a lot of their clothes.” Another speaker asserts similar convictions, but without the slightest pretense of concern. She remarks that,

It doesn’t matter. I mean all I do is wear the clothes, it doesn’t matter to me. . .

It doesn’t matter to me who makes the clothes, or whatever, those are good quality, they’re comfortable, I like wearing them, I feel good, you know.

Despite the apathetic retorts with regards to labour injustice, the group became radically invigorated when I asked whether it was fair that these corporations have low production costs yet continue to charge the consumer astronomically high prices. The members of the group exhibited their condemnation of such practices through the issue of various comments such as “it doesn’t make sense” or “I think that is so not fair!” Furthermore, many members of the group indicated that they would be prepared to join collective action against a corporation like Nike for both their labour policies, yet more importantly their perceived huge margins of profit. A number of the respondents indicated that they would take consumer action to stop child labour,⁵ but unanimous agreement with respect to collective action was only achieved when labour policies were

removed from the agenda, such that cost was the single issue. The subsequent exchange emphasizes this phenomenon, as Linda articulates that unjust labour policies are not her concern,

Linda: Like I wouldn't stop it, I wouldn't want to stop it, I'd just make the price go down.

Ted: So if the same petition simply said we want the price to go down, then you would sign it?

Linda: Oh yeah!

Ted: You'd sign that?

Linda: For sure!

Clearly, to these youth money appears to elicit much more empathy for change than do appeals founded on the deplorable working condition in the factories where the goods are produced.

The participants from the Kenora youth centre are not alone, indeed, their perspectives are representative of the vast majority of participants within this research. The young women from the Lake of the Woods area were also morosely candid about their compassion for exploited workers in the textile industry. In the exchange that follows it is apparent how the researcher, along with his commonly known bias, unduly influences the responses of the speakers such that their verbal and performative realities do not coincide. Under her own volition, Melanie indicates that it troubles her that Nike is "paying their little kids [workers]. . . nothing to make" the products they sell. Skeptical

of how my presence may intrude upon her natural attitudes, I ask her if that aspect of Nike truly bothers her. Jackie intercepts the question directed at Melanie and answers that it does not bother her. Upon further probing Melanie cedes to Jackie's honesty in remarking that,

The sweat shop thing, when I sit down and think about it, it bothers me. But when I see something I want, that I really like. . . OK, like, I'm a Gap addict, like, I always shop at the Gap. I know they have sweat shops; that doesn't stop me. I don't like that, but if I like their clothes, then I'm still going to buy it.

The seduction of the label proves to be more alluring than does the moral responsibility, obliging the individual to consume goods that are not produced and marketed at the humanitarian expense of others. Interestingly, the dilemma that confronts the consumer, between the cultural appeal of the label versus the well being of the labourer, was articulated in similar terms by the synchronized swim team. One of the young women stated that consuming with a humanitarian conscience is,

hard, see, because if only a couple of people care, and everybody else still buys. . . it's hard because everyone else is still buying, so it's the hip thing to wear.

Another member from the same conversation supports, and furthers this perspective, in remarking that she is not prepared to "buy cheap clothes just because they

are made in good places.” However, this argument was later contradicted within the same group as the young women revealed that they did not perceive Nike to be a quality product at all. Why is it that young men and women come to the defense of what they recognize to be exploitative corporations? Is this a reflection of their insensitivity to anything that does not relate to their own immediate life world? These questions and other issues will be given somewhat more attention in the sections that follow.

Sports Consumption and the Dialectic of Oppression and Empowerment

Consumption: Oppression or Empowerment

If I were to abort the interrogation at this very superficial analysis, assuming that the young speakers were pitiless towards the plight of dispossessed workers in distant places, I would be ignoring the complexity that underlies this issue. Rarely did the young men and women retort with a complete abnegation of empathy, but rather alluded to feelings of helplessness that seemingly originated from a perceived inability to avoid the tumultuous labour histories of all sorts of commodities. When asked if the exploitative conditions under which the goods they consumed were produced troubled them, a typical response often went something like; yes, but “everything is made somewhere wrong. . . everything does something in sweat shops.” My immediate assumption was to categorize this type of response as a mere justification that permitted the speakers to consume goods without a compassionate consumerist consciousness interfering with the enjoyment and pleasure they derive from the shopping experience. Although I believe that these

statements do serve a guilt alleviating function, I also think that it is crucial that the pleas of helplessness be scrutinized as a phenomenon in and of themselves.

In her insightful research Nina Eliasoph (1997) investigates how people deal with their feelings of powerlessness. She concludes that individuals perform a great deal of “cultural work” to transform their sentiments of powerlessness into expressions of apathy and self-interest. In so doing, the individual is seemingly empowered to make the decision not to care. Ultimately, the respondents in her study could not afford to care about larger issues, such as nuclear war, that are omnipresent in their lives. To do so would force them to recognize not only their weaknesses, but also the flaws of the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1981) that they had come to rely upon and believe in. According to Eliasoph, hegemony

treats people as members of cultures, who are doing their best to make sense of discouraging circumstances, even if it means turning their backs on politics. It treats political experience as a convoluted, uncalculating, historically specific, inherently cultural, and interactive response to power and powerlessness.(p. 615)

If this statement on hegemony is accepted, then the investigation ceases to simply witness comments of apathy and self-interest at face value, but rather intends to probe deeper into “how we *present* our powerlessness to ourselves and each other” (p. 621). Rick describes why he doesn’t worry about the labour problems overseas:

I think that if you read into everything that you buy like clothing, food, drinks. . . How much is it made for? Who is it made by? You'd be making your own clothes basically. Or you'd be finding someone on the street to make your clothes. I mean, there's everything wrong with anything. Like Coke is made for seven cents, but they sell it for a dollar, Nike makes their shoes in far off countries and there's little girls making them. Everything is made somewhere for cheaper and by somebody, there's a problem with everything. I just buy whatever.

In this rather bleak depiction of contemporary consumer society, Rick suggests that there is no point in trying to consume with a humanitarian consciousness because there is no alternative. There is nothing beyond the present reality, worker exploitation and corporate gouging of the consumer is ubiquitous. In the face of such givens, Rick "just buys whatever." For Eliasoph (1997), this type of explanation is effective in "erasing the calculation, leaving only the results" (p. 614). Rick, and many others that were heard in these discussions, have chosen to derive their efficacy at the level of the "results," through vehicles such as shopping choices, knowledge and criticism.

For some, the feelings of alienation encompassed the democratic process in its entirety. A young Metis woman commented on how she felt democracy was hopeless in bringing about justice of any sort. She remarked that police harassment of Native People is something that one realistically has to live with. She asserted that doing something about police injustice is:

a choice that everybody makes. You can either live with it, or you can try to do something about it. . . And you can try and try and try, you can die trying, and maybe you will get somewhere, but if it's only you that's trying . . . what's the point?

In actuality, there is no choice at all for this young woman, for her the decision is rhetorical. Her earlier comments, along with this declaration of the inevitability of social inequities, render the choice closed. Any suggestion as to the role of collectivism in combating injustice was dismissed as utopian daydreaming. For the young people involved in my research, it was commonly perceived that attempts to change larger structural defects were an exercise in futility, consequently, the language to attack the "calculation" was impotent, if not absent altogether.

The young speakers were far more competent with a language describing the helplessness that the individual experienced within the context of the corporate environment. The most revealing aspects of the explanations of powerlessness was the tremendous breadth of situations in which they were deployed and the consistency of their formulation, despite many variables that differently locate the speakers. Again, the omnipresence of corporate exploitation was repeatedly cited as a justification for not employing strategies of consumer activism. One speaker commented that, "These days you can't get away from it. So much is like that. Unless you make your own clothes you're not going to be able to get around it." This comment was met with a general ambience of agreement within the group. One member of the group even went so far as to

share a personal experience where she elaborated on her fruitless attempts to take action against the production policies of a major corporation. Her story goes as follows,

we did a letter writing campaign against Nike and we all sent letters. . . like in elementary school. . . but, like. . . it was so far removed and we never saw what happened to it and it didn't make a difference. . . it just seems redundant to even try. . . And you can get everyone to boycott Nike, it just won't work, it's just too far gone...

In this brief account, the narrator has tried, without success, to take action against Nike, thus concluding that her efforts were in vain. Life experience has seemingly taught her that a corporation like Nike is not to be effected by collective action. Whether she truly expected Nike to respond immediately and in some unequivocal manner is largely irrelevant to this paper. What is of importance, though, is the manner through which this young speaker, along with others, naturalizes both her acceptance of the atrocities committed by huge corporations, as well as her powerlessness in the face of these atrocities. How is it possible for her to suggest that Nike would not amend their practices if "everyone" were to boycott their products? Obviously, Nike would change. It could have been suggested that the necessary prerequisite to Nike changing, namely the consumer altering the habits, is the real barrier. Such a conclusion may have been more burdensome for the speakers, as it places an onus of responsibility on them, while at the same time threatening the foundations of their social-symbolic milieu.

In another exchange, it was apparent that the size of the corporation was not the only aspect that numbed the participants into apathy, but also the guilefulness of their marketing tactics. The following dialogue occurred in reply to questioning that inquired about the potential impact of a large-scale boycott of a product line such as Nike. One speaker, uncertain as to whether her comments are a statement or a question, offers that, “I think it would lose a lot of business. . . wouldn’t it?” This revealing statement suggests that the respondent has no idea of the threshold of these corporations. She does not comprehend the moment at which consumer resistance could force these massive economies to acknowledge the demands of protestors. Another member of the group adds that even if consumer resistance was to have an effect, another label would emerge to fill the void. She concedes that an extensive refusal to buy Nike would impact them, but “then they’d end up making a new kind of design, like that FUBU thing that just came out.” In this statement the participant simultaneously demonstrates a shrewd awareness of the capitalist forces that fuel these massive corporations, while expressing complete exasperation at their relentless presence within our lives. By referring to the corporations as inter-changeable, with no palpable difference between one and the next, she seems to imply that action is benign in that the infractions will remain, merely the offenders will change. For her, the company is irrelevant, she astutely observes that the seductive properties of the label are ubiquitous, ultimately it is this that renders consistent action futile.

Interestingly, the quotes cited above coincide with the work of Eliasoph (1997) in that the speakers actively make a distinction between the local and the global. When faced with the question as to why they don’t feel a compelling sense of responsibility for

those who are exploited, the responses of the narrators would more often than not include some explanation of geographical separation. Rick speaks of “far off countries,” whereas Melanie refers to how “far removed” the crisis is from their own lives. Similarly, Jackie remarks that she is certain that if “we actually went into those sweat shops and saw what they had to do. . . our opinions would change.” Mere knowledge of labour injustices is not enough to elicit changes in consumer behaviour. According to these claims, it appears that actually experiencing the horror is the only tonic potent enough to rattle the participants out of their apathy. Once more, it would be impossible to determine if this claim is real or simply a defense mechanism that justifies their lack of action to others, as well as their own consciousness. However, I suspect that claims differentiating between the local and the global are alluding to the alienation the individual experiences as he or she attempts to form a “cognitive map” (Jameson, 1988) of the global capitalist landscape. According to Jameson, it is the inability to project beyond the “here and now of immediate perception” onto the “imaginary” of a broader social-global landscape that creates feelings of alienation (p. 353). Rather than submitting to the hopelessness that comes with struggling with the ills of the global, the individual, as part of the collective, chooses to focus on the local. It is at the level of the local that the individual, as part of the collective, feels the efficacy to bring about change. These results lend credence to the work of Jameson who contends that without the establishment of a more transcending ideology that serves to inter-connect and situate the diverse and fractured realities of the global landscape into a more comprehensible “cognitive map,” the subject is left exposed to the “fragmented and schizophrenic decentering” (p. 351) that is symptomatic of consumer-based self-hood in late capitalism. Eliasoph (1997) would agree that it is the

collective sense of impotence at the global level that results in the young speakers re-directing their concerns towards the local where they are able to celebrate their empowerment in the form of consumption choices, knowledge and criticisms of the goods consumed.

Although geographical distance is unquestionably a factor in diminishing one's empathy for those exploited in the textile industries, Lafrance (1998) is not prepared to accept this explanation at face value. She argues that it is not geographical, but rather racial differences, that enables "bourgeois women to participate in Nike's inevitable exploitation of Third World women without guilt or reflection" (p. 135). To consciously continue consuming garments that are produced under exploitative conditions in far off countries is only possible in a culture that ensconces itself in a racial ideology that privileges whiteness over people of colour (hooks, 1981; Lafrance, 1998; Macklin, 1994). For Lafrance (1997), it is not so much an issue of physical distance, but moreover an orienting belief that there is "no relationship between themselves and the women who make their shoes" (p. 11).

Rick demonstrates the distinction he makes between himself and the Other by commenting that "I know that some little girl. . . some eight-year old girl in a far off country made the shoes, but. . . I mean, if they didn't work there, where would they work?" Later in the conversation, he continues to answer his own question as to where the little girl would work; perhaps "for the guy down the street, the pimp? I mean, think about it, a business came in that is actually paying them." In these comments, it is apparent that Rick is speaking from a position of privilege that denies him the opportunity to analyze the situation from the perspective of those being exploited.

Attempts at empathy by the speakers served to reveal that they were more likely to identify with the corporate leaders who were making the decisions to indirectly support labour injustices through their contracts with exploitative firms, than they were to those against who the injustices were committed. One participant stated that “No one can say it’s completely wrong because what if they got in their (big business executives) shoes some day? Are they not going to do it?” This statement, which was insinuated in several different groups, is tremendously enlightening in that it does not even consider the plight of those exploited. Remarkably, such vicarious emotions infer that the respondents do not identify with the subjugated position, but rather are focusing vertically on the perspective of those who wield the power to exploit. I suspect that such sentiments are the results of the capitalist democratic ideology which continuously barrage the speakers in their daily lives as much as it is a racist ideology. Ironically, many of the participants who asserted this ideal were themselves people of colour whom, in other contexts, had expressed frustration at the racism that existed in North American society.

This leads me to borrow a concept from hooks (1981) and apply it to this phenomenon. Although hooks is speaking of the situation between black and white women, I think the theory has resonance in explaining why people of colour in a First World nation are relatively unsympathetic to the people of colour in a Third World nation. She writes,

Because women’s liberation has been equated with gaining privileges within the white male power structure, white men. . . have dictated the terms by which women are allowed entrance into the system. One of the terms male

patriarchs have set is that one group of women is granted privileges that they obtain by actively supporting the oppression and exploitation of other groups of women. (p. 156)

It is the split between genders based on colour that is of relevance to my interpretation. I suggest that a similar divide has been fostered between people of colour based on geographical location. It is no secret that North American material wealth is largely founded on the exploitation of Third World nations, thereby making it necessary to forgo the well-being of the members of those nations in order to procure the privileges of Western culture. As hooks comments above, the terms of privilege within the West are established according to the ideology of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In order to enjoy the advantages of the West, one must adopt a philosophical framework that is somewhat consistent with the dominant ideology, which is forever making the distinction between the West and the Other. I suspect that the responses which were cited above find their origins in capitalist ideology, nationalism, sexism, narcissism, peer pressure, which go a long way to informing the life-world of those interviewed.

The Freedom of Expression within the Theater of Consumption

Ironically, the appeals the participants made characterizing themselves as helpless in relation to the barrage of signs and products found on the market contradict the foundations upon which capitalist consumption is based. The seductive and omnipresent label, according to the narratives cited above, is effective in nullifying the ability of the consumer to choose commodities without the exploitative labour histories that are

associated with so many of the top name brands such as Nike and the Gap. These testimonials are an apocalyptic mark against the tenets of consumption, which contend that consumer choice is the moment at which the individual is able to exert his or her power. The power to consume or not to consume, and to choose what to consume; such freedom of choice is the supposed source of empowerment for the consumer. However, the participants have presented this freedom more as helplessness than empowerment.

Probyn (1990) is instructive in suggesting that consumer empowerment through choice is an ephemeral sort of authority in that it functions “not on choice but as a reaffirmation” (p. 152) of dominant cultural parameters. For Probyn, the contemporary consumption landscape offers choices that are “freed of the necessity of thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing” (p. 156). What is most interesting is how the young speakers unabashedly confirmed the rather pessimistic perspective of consumption suggested by Probyn and others (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Lafrance, 1998). For example, the young women quoted in the preceding paragraph speak of the Gap as a “style of flesh” (Bartky, 1988, p. 78) so influential in their quotidian fashions that they are prepared to ignore the realities of the sweat shop labourers who produce the garments. Aware of the exploitative labour practices that are present in the factories that produce their garments, the young women relinquished any opportunity to make a political statement, rather opting to consume the vacuity of the sign.

Nevertheless, those involved in the conversations repeatedly issued anecdotal utterances isolating the freedom of choice expressed within a commodity-based market system as an integral moment of individual empowerment. It would seem that one’s

individuality is best able to experience sovereignty somewhere within the clothing racks at the Gap, or while perusing the most recent line of Nike running shoes. However, in light of the segments of conversation quoted in the preceding paragraphs, such appeals to the liberating capacities of the consumer experience do not seem overly convincing. Rather, I suspect that the proffering of choice, which is the foundation of the consumption experience, is a potent alibi that obscures the interstitial functions that make the system possible. In other words, the extension of options within the shopping experience locates the individual within an empowered state, but the command is necessarily fleeting and is coupled with a less obvious, but equally pervasive, underside.

During the conversations the youth frequently made casual statements referring to the freedom the individual is able to utilize with respect to the goods and styles they consume. The young people involved in the conversations understood and repeatedly articulated the freedom of expression as a taken-for-granted right of the individual consumer. The self-rule of the shopper to choose on what to spend their money is presented as a sacrosanct privilege. Such sentiments were demonstrated with Kelly's typified assumption; "It's a free country, go ahead and do what you want. We don't make fun of people." Kelly seemingly conceptualizes the choices of any given person as a moment of empowerment that is beyond social reproach. Nevertheless, this empowered state is interpenetrating with a host of factors, which inform, repress and sublimate any true expression of individuality. Regardless of Kelly's verbal allusions to her belief in the freedom of choice, much of her testimonials was not entirely consistent with the above-quoted mentality. As the conversation progressed, Kelly negated her original insinuation that she did not "make fun" of people with styles different than her own. In one story she

told, just moments after her endorsing freedom of expression rhetoric, she goes into painstaking detail of how her peer group tormented a young woman from Britain with a style different than their own. She explains,

She wears these tight things that doesn't look good. . . and she wears high heels and it looks really bad. . . so people make fun of her. . . and she felt real bad. But then we didn't stop. . . Now she is so pissed, so she's trying to like one of us, cause she's not really, she's acting so weird. . . no one talks to her.

Kelly's story is a poignant illustration of how fashion discourse is a pervasive factor in policing the individualistic impulses of the consumer. The participants were perpetually contradicting themselves as they referred to the freedom of the individual to consume as they pleased while simultaneously placing verbal (and in some instances physical) restrictions on their choices. Although the British woman that Kelly refers to is physically free to experiment with fashion ensembles, she, nevertheless, faces severe social consequences for her individuality. Bound by the fashion informed panoptic gaze and disciplinary regimes that pervade her peerage, the British woman is either to concede to social pressures, or she will continue to be socially censured and ostracized from her peers.

Foucault's conceptualizations of discipline and surveillance are instrumental in comprehending the dynamics of power that envelope the realm of consumption. If we accept Nava's (1987) assertion, as I do, that consumption is an "ever-expanding discursive apparatus" (p. 206) that labours to inform the social body in all respects, then

it becomes difficult to understand consumption as an individual experience. Rather, shopping can be seen as a discipline that renders “bodily behaviour routine, repetitive, mechanically predictable, subject to codification and hence “objective” scrutiny and assessment” (Bauman, 1983, p. 33). As can be discerned in Kelly’s story, she does not celebrate the deviant fashion sense of her newly immigrated British peer, but rather characterizes her to be a social anomaly and deals with her accordingly. As told by Kelly, the young British woman eventually succumbs to peer pressures and makes attempts to transform her style in an effort to fit in. Kelly explains that it will be extremely difficult for her to fit in because “she doesn’t have the proper clothes or something.” The external pressures to conform are blatantly evident in this narrative. However, less obvious but equally pertinent are the internal forces that appraise not only the Other, but also the self. The discursive regime of fashion becomes so entrenched in the cognizance of the youth that they are able to make value judgements about something as arbitrary as fashion, evaluating both those around them as well as, and perhaps more importantly, themselves. Foucault explains how discourse circulates within our everyday lives thereby resulting in an internal surveillance, or rather,

An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he [or she] is his [or her] own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself [or herself]. (p. 155)

The standard that Kelly applied to the young British woman was obviously one against which she measured herself. The monitoring of external boundaries that differentiate the self from the Other are crucial to the stable internal comprehension of the self (Cole & Hribar, 1998). It is only through a relationship to those that are different—the external Other—that it is possible to translate the amorphous existence of fashion consumption into some semblance of a tangible identity. Cole and Hribar comment on this phenomenon:

The normal and abnormal must be understood as both contingent and mutually implicated and dependent categories: The border that marks the self is continuously generated through a social process of producing and the other.
(p. 121)

In other words, the type of surveillance that monitors both the self and the Other is crucial to one's identity; it seemingly provides palpable social coordinates against which individuals are able to reflectively discern who they are by viewing who and what they are not.

What was most interesting to me about the stories the young speakers shared was the taken-for-granted assumption of freedom of choice within the theater of consumption. Despite the various factors that impeded free reigning choice and empowerment (eg. money, peer pressure, size of the corporations providing the goods), the youth rarely spoke despairingly about their freedom. How is it possible for our collective conscience to continue to understand the market system as free and empowering (as was expressed in

almost all instances) when confronted with so many factors that confine choice and provide minuscule instances of fleeting empowerment? Lafrance (1998) suggests a significant portion of our notion of freedom is based upon the circulation of imagery depicting “destitute bodies. . . marked by their unfreeness, their sickness, their dependency” that “serves to normalize the free and healthy bodies” (Lafrance, 1998, p. 127). In other words, in order to achieve the perception of freedom one must contrast their social location against those who are comparatively unfree; such as the images of impoverished bodies, both domestic and foreign, that are in abundance in any daily news medium. Perhaps the exploited labour forces that produce our branded commodities are a necessary adjunct to the subconscious of a society that requires a point of demarcation by which to conceive of their relationally defined privilege.

There is ample evidence of how the speakers in my research have verbally and mentally dissolved major structural obstacles, which they perceive to be beyond their control, in favour of narrower, more localized and manageable concerns. Knowledge, choice and criticism were three overlapping methods that the participants actively utilized to empower themselves in relation to the commodities they consumed. In order to derive pleasure from Nike, for example, it is necessary that the consumer perform a certain degree of “cultural work” that endeavors to subordinate the commodity, thereby making it necessary to neutralize the production history of the product consumed. However, as Eliasoph (1997) notes, in order for cultural work (in this case the calculated manipulation of production histories) to be effective, it must take place at an unconscious level; the speaker is not necessarily aware of his or her insouciance towards labour exploitation. Broad issues over which the individual has little control are suspended, and power is

demonstrated through other avenues. In my research, power was verbally exhibited through the presentation of knowledge about the products and companies, the choices exercised by the consumer, and the various critiques of the commodities. These three techniques used to demonstrate consumer efficacy were thoroughly illustrated in the previous section.

Navigating Capitalism: Naturalization, Justification and Celebration

Although I find Eliasoph's article illuminating in that it puts forth a very instructive perspective in its refusal to witness narratives of self-interest as merely the dark side of humanity, I suggest her analysis is incomplete. The admission of powerlessness, although authentic to a certain degree, could also be employed as a method of absolving oneself from responsibility. It is not only the consistency and ease with which the young participants describe their helplessness, but it is also the curious, and often inconsistent, tendency to advocate the very factors that prove to be oppressive. To say that one is helpless against the huge conglomerates that produce the symbols of their everyday life is one thing, but it does not explain why some of the respondents verbally worked to justify, and in some cases even celebrate, the exploitative practices of these corporations. Notwithstanding the real sentiments of feebleness the youth experience with regards to big business and capitalism in general, I find it intriguing how they verbally manipulate elements of these seemingly oppressive social institutions in characterizing both themselves and the larger systematic structures. As I understood the dialogue, there were three responses to the broad-based inquiries that sought to investigate how the young

participants felt about the exploitative aspects of capitalism. The responses included naturalization, justification and, in the most extreme instances, celebration.

It appeared to me that attempts to naturalize the apolitical disposition of the consuming population were essentially an effort to absolve oneself from the onus of responsibility with respect to the harrowing effects capitalism so often creates and perpetuates. In an effort to universalize the apathetic sentiments that were emerging amongst a group of young women with respect to the coarser substratum of the glamorous veneer of capitalism, one speaker reflected that “people are selfish. We want to look good before thinking of others, you know. I think that’s just human nature, like, you always want to get ahead.” This statement was made by the same girl who had earlier in the discussion been reproached for stating that she worried about the young people who were exploited in sweatshops. Not only did she then reveal that she was not overly concerned with this injustice, but she also laboured to make her unconcern a normal, and therefore, permissible stance. She even goes as far as to attribute it to “human nature,” an urge beyond the control of the individual, a biological imperative. Such an ideological standpoint may in fact be quite legitimate in the political consciousness of today’s citizenry. However, what I find curious is the unaffectedness with which the young speaker verbally traverses between contradicting statements, shifting from hard-line posture against labour injustice towards a very whimsical demeanor where self-interest supplants compassion. Finally, I think this comment is instructive in that it summons its veracity from the dictates of capitalism. In essence, when the speaker comments that “you always want to get ahead” she is making an appeal towards the doctrines of liberal

individualism, whereby empowerment is acquired at the expense of others. The expressed mentality is a sort of variation on the social Darwinist ideal of “survival of the fittest.”

Furthermore, the participants verbally laboured to naturalize their propensity to consume products that were produced under exploitative conditions. The young speakers talked as though it was impossible to consume commodities that are not in some way originating from exploitative labour roots. On numerous occasions, defeated speakers argued that “Everything is made somewhere for cheaper and by somebody, there’s a problem with everything. I just buy whatever.” As mentioned in the previous section, this plea of inevitability of worker exploitation is an attempt to argue that the endeavours of the politically motivated shopper are futile. There is no point of departure from which one can mount a campaign seeking to consume ethically. Upon recognizing this, it then becomes acceptable for the individual to submit to the mercy of his or her most pressing consumption whims in search of satisfaction, or so the logic goes. Interestingly, this line of rhetoric is not altogether passive, but is frequently accompanied by an aggressive intonation. One speaker aptly demonstrates this point when she comments, “I’m not going to buy cheap clothes just because they are made in good places.” Not only is this a defense of her shopping habits, but it also levels an onslaught at the consumer that may select their goods according to the labour conditions under which they were produced. Essentially, she implies that those who are not buying Nike and the Gap are getting an inferior, or “cheap,” product. What exactly she means by “cheap” is not immediately evident, but she has defended her choices against those that might suggest she should consume morally.

Admittedly, the verbal techniques of naturalizing and justifying are not mutually exclusive, and therefore any distinction between the two is somewhat arbitrary. For the most part I understand justification to be the process where the young speakers attempted to naturalize the encompassing capitalist structures in and through which they consumed, as opposed to the justification of their own habits. In other words, I have implemented the term naturalization to refer to the mechanisms through which the individual comes to understand his or her own consumption activities. For the purposes of this essay, naturalization is differentiated from justification, where the speakers attempt to comprehend and articulate the motives of the big businesses that produce the brands they consume.

When asked why brand names were so expensive, the youth were split in their responses, some arguing vehemently that the commodities were over-priced, while others set about describing and justifying why brand names were more costly. One speaker representing the latter group explained that the huge advertising budgets of brand names, like Coca-Cola, make it necessary to charge inflated prices. He comments of Coke that "I'd rather it was thirty-five cents like it used to be, but now it's just the brand name Coca-Cola. . . It sponsors so many things that it has to cost a dollar in order for them to make a profit." One of his peers adds to this in identifying sponsorship as a crucial element in the seductive properties of the brand. He explains of the brand West Beach, a snowboard clothing company, that he "likes them because of what they did and what they sponsored and stuff like that." He continues that "so many snow board companies like Dub I don't like because they sponsor all rapper stuff, and not really snowboard." In conclusion, he remarks that he is prepared to pay more to consume the brand that is

associated through sponsorship with snowboarding events. Both of the young men demonstrated a reasonably penetrating understanding of the marketing techniques that buoyed the brands they consumed. Indirectly they acknowledged that it was the sizzle, and not the steak, they were purchasing.

The most pervasive argument justifying over-priced brand names and worker exploitation was premised on the idea that it was impossible to criticize what corporate executives did because they are simply executing what each of us would do if we held such positions. Seemingly, business executives are driven by the undeniable impulses of profit maximization, which are not to be resisted by any mortal being should they fall into such a position of power. For the young speakers, this recognition somehow validates the exploitative prices and labour practices of massive corporations. One speaker explains that “No one can say it is completely wrong. . . what if they got in their shoes some day? Are they not going to do the same?” In his rhetorical question, the speaker effectively silences all critics by suggesting that it is your lack of power that makes it possible for you to condemn the performances of these corporations. Another young man from a different group presented a similar idea arguing that “It’s business. . . However you want to make money, you make money.” Business, as an idea, appears to occupy an irrefutable position within the consciousness of the young speakers. Many of the youth presented the profit motive as a powerful and justifiable drive that, unfortunately but necessarily, results in human casualties in the form of exploitative labour practices and artificially inflated prices.

A bravadoism accompanied the characterization of capitalism to such an exaggerated extent amongst the Persian males that I almost felt as though the expression

of such sentiments was a display of virility. Initially, in a conversation consisting of young Persian men and women, the men were prepared to criticize the inconsistencies of capitalism. Millen shared his experiences as a soccer player who is working hard at his sport in hopes of attaining a scholarship or potentially making soccer his career. He explains that,

I've learned by playing with my friends in the area, 'cause we go in the mornings, in the summer time, we wake up at six in the morning. We buy nets. . . like a friend of mine. . . we go and practice our shooting skills, our passing skills, dribbling skills, we practice all this until we are perfect.

However, later in the conversation, Millen disdainfully contrasts his efforts with those of a wealthy peer at his school. Millen comments: "It really ticks me off! . . . He went to. . . I know he took one year just for shooting. . . He hired, like ahh. . . he's so rich, he's a millionaire." Admittedly, Millen does not have the money that affords him the specialized coaching that is available to his peer, and this proves to be a frustration for him. In a summarizing critique of what it takes to be successful, he comments, "If you have the money to be successful in this society we live in, you'll go to the top of anything. All you need is money for soccer, you'll get anywhere." He later adds that "dedication" is also an integral attribute to success.

Despite his expressed frustration at the inequalities that are spun out of differentials of family wealth, Millen adopts an entirely different demeanor when he is with his more vocal male friends. When I repeat his declaration that isolates money as the element that

breed prosperity in today's society, the group seems to accept this observation, commenting "You better believe it!" while another speaker states that "Money brings money." However, the cynical attitude that had previously accompanied Millen's indictment of capitalism was noticeably absent. Rather, the group seemed to find empowerment in discussing how they overcame these financial inequities. Most strikingly, this involved the verbal celebration of violence. In response to my questioning about capitalism, the group collectively censured any trajectory of dialogue that presented them in a subjugated position. An example of this is illustrated in the following assertion that was uttered with reference to the affluent atmosphere of the students that comprised their high school. One speaker explained, "The thing is, there are different groups, right, people get their respect different ways. Some people get it by money, some people get it by violence, some people get it by theft and all that stuff." This comment was favorably received by the other participants who then began emphatically detailing their experiences of physical prowess. Physical violence and the toughness of the Persians was a common theme throughout the entire conversation regardless of the topic of discussion. One of the participants reveals of his friend that, "His respect comes from the fact that he has a knife in his bag." The following exchange aptly demonstrates how this group envisions the derivatives of their respect.

John: It goes back to. . . it comes from, these guys can fight, I'm their friend, because they can fight, they back me up.

Wayne: Exactly!

Elias: You have connections, no one's going to touch you.

Wayne: Exactly! Word up man! Power, power man! Persian power!

Although the final rambunctious slogan appears to be somewhat in jest, these young men are serious about violence being the basis of their empowerment. Obviously, this changes the ambience into which Millen's comments are received, thus impacting his mode of expression. Whereas he spoke with a considerable amount of frustration in the conversation consisting of both young men and women, no such animosity was demonstrable within this context. Instead, Millen spoke with brash intonation of self-empowerment that was consistent with the group's milieu. He remarks of the disparities of capitalism that, "Of course!" [they exist] But listen. . . I'm going to the top. If I say I'm going to do something. . . I do good in school, I do wicked in soccer. . . I will get to the top!"

In spite of the reverberant optimism of the conversation, there were moments when the young speakers inadvertently exposed bleak premonitions of what the future may have in store for them. In the midst of celebratory approvals of capitalism, John comments that,

the only bad kids you see that make it to the top is ahh, rap music and those that play. . . you know, have a good jump shot. Name me one Persian kid that has actually made it to the top. . . from Toronto, like ghetto Persian out of Iran. . . come to Toronto and make it to the top?. . . Name me one Persian right now from the ghetto who is going to make money when he grows up?

John's indictment against the structures that bind Persian immigrants to subordinate roles within urban Canada were not condemned by his peers, in fact, the group did not respond to his comments at all. It seemed as though remarks reaffirming the ability of the individual to break down and overcome the forces that shackle one to a particular social position received greater encouragement from the group. As with Millen, John abandoned his critical tone and joined the others in verbally demonstrating his capacity to succeed within the capitalist system.

Sports Consumption and Gender Negotiation

Gender Narratives

The constant flux of aligning yourself with the "us," while at once dissociating yourself from the "them" is an integral aspect of defining your self, in and through sport. Brian Pronger (1998) understands "modern sport [as] a project of differentiation and socio-cultural boundary maintenance" (p. 281). Socially, sport plays a crucial role in forming our cognitive ordering of the world. Gender, physicality, sexuality, race, and class are all portrayed and enacted within sport. Pronger elaborates:

Sport not only gives expression to the maintenance of the boundaries between men and women, masculinities and femininities, heterosexualities and homosexualities, it also contributes to the production of these boundaries by bestowing on those who participate in sport and those who are fans of sport,

manhood and womanhood, masculinity and femininity, the aura of explicit heterosexuality and the opportunity for implicit homosexuality. (p. 283)

The participants intuitively recognized how their participation within various athletic programs served to locate them within certain boundaries and inscribe them with particular social markings. At moments, these inscriptions were rebelled against, while at other times, they were welcomed. From the dialogue of the participants it can be witnessed how they depicted their athletic endeavours with a verbal slant in an attempt to achieve the desired social position. The following section will attempt to unfold a variety of the struggles in which the speakers engaged in an effort to gain recognition for their sport, transcend the shackles of their gendered life-world, while other times labouring to discursively bind the Other to various societal compartments.

Sport and the Gendered Experience

The young women who took part in the conversations often made attempts to verbally articulate their sporting endeavours as being somewhat of a separate place. A place beyond the scrutiny of the members of the opposite sex, where they were able to enjoy their bodily movements for their own sake. One member of a group of synchronized swimmers commented that “Synchro is, like, where girls can shine. . . because. . . there’s not a lot of professional football, baseball, whatever, that women can really do, so synchro is kind of like our sport.” Her peers agreed with her, one commenting that synchronized swimming “allows us to get away from guys. Like come to the pool, it’s just all the girls together. . . [we can] talk about whatever, do anything,

and we don't have to worry about guys." For this group of young women, the absence of males is a sort of freedom where they are able to temporarily release themselves from the socially appropriate roles that confine them in everyday inter-gender situations. This point was emphasized by one participant who half-jokingly commented that, "We can, like, wedgie each other and we're not worried."

Seemingly, synchronized swimming and its associated camaraderie, offer its participants a moment to transgress what Cole (1993) refers to as "technologies of femininity" (pp. 86-87). For Cole,

Technologies of femininity refer to those knowledges, practices, and strategies that manufacture and normalize the feminine body; those techniques, actions, and structures deployed to sculpt, fashion, and secure bodily shapes, gestures, and adornments that are recognizably female. (p. 87)

Admittedly, the members of the synchronized swim team are able to playfully engage in activities that are decidedly unfeminine with relative impunity due to the absence of the male gaze. However, the potential to transgress the technologies of femininity within the synchronized swimming milieu is fleeting and partial. The feminine body is inscribed into the very structure of the sport; codified within the rules and policed by the judges' valuation of the elegance, synchronicity, and body type of the swimmers.

I met with the synchronized swim team several times before the actual group discussion took place. During one of these meetings I noticed the young women were looking at themselves in the reflective glass that made up the wall at the far end of the

pool. Their conversation revolved around their bodies, how their bathing suits fit them, how they were larger here or smaller there. Assuming the role of the naïve interrogator, I asked them how important body shape was for success within their sport. The discussion that ensued from this question was quite intriguing. At once, the swimmers and their female coach defended and criticized the prejudicial evaluation of certain body types within the sport. The conversation proceeded as follows:

Ted: Does body type play a role in how you are evaluated by judges?

Amanda: I think so.

Nancy: I think that is changing though, isn't it?

Coach: The ability of the swimmer to create a vertical line is heavily effected by their body proportions, put it that way. And the excellence on a vertical line, which is the straight up and down portion, does, a lot of times, depend on what a swimmer's body proportions look like. . . and all these things come into play as far as how a body type will look in a certain position.

Amanda: Sylvie Fréchette, that Olympic swimmer, she was penalized for being heavy. Like when she was swimming, like the judges actually said to her, she went up to them afterwards, and she's like: "How'd you like my routine?" And her coach went up to them too, and her coach said: "she needs to lose some weight, because we don't like the way she looks." She wrote that in her book.

Sherry: Physically they've changed. Like when Sylvie was doing it, they weren't doing the training that the Centre for Excellence is doing. They weren't in really good shape then, they were, but they weren't.

Nancy: Yeah, it's changed.

Coach: Body type is also inherently built into our sport in that the goal is to make everyone look the same. And going beyond the training to make sure the execution looks the same, the next step would be to have eight girls who look the same, so it's even that less of a difference between all eight of them.

The above conversation is revealing in that several, somewhat contradicting, themes are simultaneously emerging from the dialogue. The athletes express concern and levy a slight criticism of the manner in which body type plays such a crucial role in their sport. However, this criticism is tempered by two factors. First, the coach goes to some lengths to naturalize the fact that synchronized swimming evaluates bodies. For her, pressures to conform to certain body types are "inherently built into the sport." The synchronous nature of the sport extends beyond simple execution of the routine, whereby physical factors such as facial features, height, and body type become determining ingredients in how the swimmers and their routine are judged. The closer the team gets to total uniformity amongst its members, the more likely the score will reflect perfection. By naturalizing the discriminatory evaluations toward certain body types, the coach has effectively elevated this aspect of the sport beyond reproach. The parameters of the

conversation are sealed against criticisms launched at the judging of the sport, which adheres to a very limited spectrum of body types. Slim, muscular bodies naturally lend themselves to the routines performed in the sport of synchronized swimming, or so it would appear according to the logic of the coach. Obviously, such a stance does not provide for a critique as to why the petite feminine body of which Cole (1993) speaks is privileged over all other body types. Second, the athletes themselves apprehensively defend the systemic discriminations within their sport. While Amanda shared her rather disturbing story about Sylvie Fréchette's negative experiences as an over-sized competitor, the other members of the group attributed the onus of blame to Sylvie's lack of training. I interpreted this exchange as a move by the discussants to divert criticism of their sport from the level of the systemic to that of the individual. In other words, the story of Sylvie was understood and portrayed as an isolated case that could have been avoided provided the individual and her coaches were more dedicated to the healthy athletic body. For these athletes, the integrity of synchronized swimming was preserved through the use of inter-relating explanations which both witnessed the individual as responsible for her body type, while simultaneously arguing that the judging of contemporary synchronized swimming has changed, and such critical evaluations of body type are unlikely.

Bartky (1988) suggests that for these young female athletes to deconstruct the sexist and patriarchal assumptions that are constitutive of their sport may prove to be too threatening to the benefits that are acquired through their complicit participation. She states of women, and their reservations to radical feminist critiques, that such analyses "pose a threat not only to a women's sense of her own identity and desirability but to the

very structure of her social universe” (p. 78). The women in the preceding discussion did express reservations about the judging of their sport. However, these reservations were almost always followed by verbal attempts to legitimize and stabilize the basic structure of synchronized swimming.

The athletes made valiant efforts to distance themselves from the feminine ideal, which is intrinsic to their sport. Admittedly, the group recognizes that synchronized swimming is socially perceived, with good foundation, as a “girlie sport,” to borrow one speaker’s description. Another speaker commented of their sport:

people see it as being full of jewels and sparkly stuff and beautiful bathing caps with rhinestones and all this stuff. . . so it’s a very pretty sport. . . the kind of sport where you are looked at to see how pretty you can be in the water...

Regardless of the feminine veneer of synchronized swimming, the aspect of the sport that the young women chose to emphasize were the masculine elements of muscular endurance, physical strength, and vital lung capacity. One of the young women explains that “The elegance and grace helps you get the points, it makes your routine look better, but if you don’t have the strength or stamina, you can forget about it, because it looks like crap.” The group continued to make comments that served to confirm this point. Another speaker explained how synchronized swimming is an entire package that encompasses so many elements. She explained that “. . . synchro swimmers can probably beat people from other sports in other areas. Like, we can keep up with speed swimmers in speed, we

have more stamina than so many sports, we're probably stronger than many guys in many aspects, we're more flexible. . . ." I found it intriguing that it was this invisible side of synchro that the group chose to accentuate. The fluidity and grace that were readily perceptible on the surface were largely ignored during the conversations in favour of descriptions of the masculine underpinnings that make the pristine façade possible. Seemingly, the athletes were anxious to distance themselves from the overly feminine characterizations of their sport. Rather, they wanted their sport to be recognized in its own right as a physically challenging accomplishment that required a host of skills to execute.

Interestingly, another speaker from a different group of all female conversationalists chose to emphasize grace and skill, as opposed to muscle, in describing women's hockey. She explained that,

Guys and girls sports are like two. . . they're very different because girls sports is more like umm, finesse and guys is like strength. Like you look at hockey there is no hitting or body checking in our game. You have a lot more skill, you have to be a lot quicker on your feet.

Is it simply coincidence that the participant of hockey, a sport which is typically perceived to be more masculine, chooses to distance herself from the maleness of the activity? One might interpret her verbal attempts to minimize the masculinity of female hockey as an effort to re-establish her femininity amongst her peers. Although this may be a very real factor, I would suggest that her motivations for distancing her sport from

the physicality of men's hockey were similar to the aspirations of the members of the group of synchronized swimmers, who tried to insert elements of masculinity into their overtly feminine sport. All of the discussants quoted above were labouring to secure status-bearing recognition for their respective sports according to the parameters of the dominant masculinity that pervades all of sport.

For Jackie, the young female hockey player cited above, to argue that women's hockey is equal to men's on every plane, including strength and physical violence, would elicit tremendous rebuttal. Thus, she chooses to point out how men's and women's hockey differ, thereby, according to her logic, rendering them incomparable. The following exchange demonstrates how Jackie works to deflate the oppositional comparison between men's and women's hockey.

Melanie: People will always. . . and well, I will admit too, Guys. . . for instance hockey, it's faster, like quicker, more competitive. . .

Teresa: It's more entertaining.

Jackie: But what you have to do is not compare guys hockey to girls. You gotta look at guys hockey and say "Oh yeah he's a great player!" and then just look at girls hockey and pick out the good players instead of picking out the guys that are way better than the girls.

Jackie does not want the quality of women's hockey to be determined by reflectively measuring it against men's hockey. Conversely, she wants women's hockey to stand separate and distinct from male leagues. If the binary comparison between men's

and women's hockey could be broken, the female players would be able to achieve recognition in their own right. I would contend that by focusing on the softer, more dexterous style of women's hockey, Jackie is able to both achieve acclaim for her sport while simultaneously preserving her femininity. By arguing that women's hockey has more "finesse," "speed," and "skill" than does men's hockey, which centres around "strength," Jackie has given her sport softer, more feminine connotation, therein legitimizing her participation. If, for example, she were to argue that female hockey players were physically more aggressive than males (which I'm sure is often the case) this would threaten the very fabric of hegemonic masculinity that structures sport. As will be demonstrated latter in this section, a disruption of this sort could potentially result in the perpetrator being socially ostracized through any number of censoring measures.

Synchronized swimming has no equivalent male league shadowing their sport, and therefore, there is little threat of male athletes out-performing, and thus diminishing, their accomplishments. On the contrary, the members of the synchronized swim team willfully drew comparisons between their sport and other male dominated sports. Only through establishing their sport as embodying many aspects beyond the feminine components of grace and elegance could the group of synchronized swimmers achieve legitimization. In other words, it seemed as though the athletes could only validate their sport by appealing to the masculine sensibilities that circulate within male sport. If this is the case, as I would suggest, it explains the efforts the young women exerted in channeling attention away from the feminine sheen towards the more rugged, masculine underside of their sport.

Validation for female hockey players and synchronized swimmers was achieved through reference to male sport. It occurred to me that the need to authenticate women's sport by continually situating it opposite of men's tended to exile their athleticism to the periphery, or rather, established it as an epiphenomenon. In order to define their sport, both to themselves and others, the young women felt the need to speak of male sport. Their expressions of what their athleticism entailed could, seemingly, only be articulated through a never-ending verbal consultation with the ideology of male dominated sport. Intermittently, the speakers would borrow, refute, or compete with the ideological paradigm of male athletics in verbally depicting their sport. It became apparent throughout the discussions that for these women their sport could only be "understood through the presence of the Other and presence to the Other" (Maffesoli, 1991, p. 14). I would argue that the incessant need of the speakers to refer to the Other when depicting their own ventures relegates female sport to a subordinate status.

Despite the labourious efforts of the synchronized swimmers to portray their athletics as embodying traits associated with masculinity, they were careful not to emphasize these aspects beyond socially appropriate boundaries. Even though the athletes described themselves as being physically muscular, in some cases stronger than men, at different points in the conversation they re-inserted themselves under the "dominating gaze of patriarchy" (Barky, 1988, pp. 82-83). Unable to unleash themselves from the "panoptical male connoisseur" who "resides in the consciousness of most women" (p. 72), the young speakers reveal their fears of being socially isolated from their male peers.

For example, both groups of women expressed a reverence for the tenets of feminism, but stated that they were not prepared to actively assert their opinions in certain social situations, most notably, in front of males. One respondent explained, “You don’t have to be a bitch to be a feminist. You can be a feminist without being really mean and stuff. But you wouldn’t come out and say “Oh I’m a feminist,” it’s associated with bitchiness.” Although this woman identifies with many elements of movement feminism, she is not prepared to jeopardize her social positioning to demonstrate her commitments. She was not alone with this concern. Another group of women made similar comments, one discussant states, “They [guys] do chastise you for that [feminism]. Guys will get on your case for that.” Another member of the conversation supported the preceding sentiments, commenting that even though she considered herself to be a feminist she would not publicly declare her politics in front of men. She explains that “. . . guys are scared away by that. . . they are very threatened.” Bartky (1988) explains that this silent support of feminist thought is attributable to the fear of social alienation. Feminism “questions the patriarchal construction of the female body, threatens women with a certain de-skilling” (p. 77), of all the procurements achieved through the complicit enactment of the feminine body. Although the young discussants presented themselves as empowered, self-confident women, mitigating social factors prevented any serious, long-term transgressions of social barriers, as can be witnessed in their fears of outwardly displaying the feminist beliefs that many of participants admittedly maintained.

Moreover, the narratives of the synchronized swimmers, which sought to present themselves as self-assured, autonomously capable women, often made reference to their athletic bodies as representative of their empowered state. Cole (1993) argues, that to

some extent, the female body is increasingly experiencing an emergent “technology of femininity” which has appropriated the hard body that is associated with women’s athletics. In this new form of femininity,

women produce themselves as commodities; identities, exchange value and self-worth are embedded in body management. The potential gender/body transgressions sought by feminist critics have been, to a great extent, recuperated through body-marketing practices in consumer culture. (p. 87)

The commodified perception of the athletic body was reflected in the discussions with the synchronized swimmers who spoke of their physicality as though it was a fashion accessory. One speaker elaborates on her make-up rituals that “It’s nice to look nice. . . when you’ve got the body you’ve got from swimming, you look even nicer.” If there is any question as to who the respondent is attempting to impress, such ambiguity was dismissed by another speaker who placed the locus of their corporeal maintenance within the purview of the male gaze. She comments, “Well, the guys that like me say, ‘Good body, you’re active a lot.’” For her this was a source of empowerment, men preferred her figure to those of less athletic, docile bodies. When asked if the preservation of a hard body was one of the reasons for participating in synchro Sherry answered, “Umm, not really. . . it’s just one of the benefits,” while another speaker added, “Yeah it keeps you in shape.” The group was careful not to overly exaggerate their awareness of their figures, however, the social prestige the members acquired through their athletic bodies did not go unnoticed. Another group of five women and one man referred to the

Spice Girls when articulating their conceptions of feminism. When I asked the group what feminism meant to them,

Dawn: Blah, blah, blah, girl power [Said with a very uninterested tone].

Ted: You don't agree with that?

Dawn: It doesn't matter.

Ted: Are the Spice Girls Feminist?

Linda: Yeah.

Dawn: Yeah.

Bev: They just want to sell stuff.

Tony: Well, it's not girl power, it's sex power.

Ted: So, is selling sex empowering to women?

Dawn I don't know, for the Spice Girls it is?

Some of the members of this group confused issues of sex appeal, notoriety, and wealth with feminist empowerment. For Dawn and Linda the commodified version of feminism that is marketed by the Spice Girls is the embodiment of the real thing. A group of pop singers, each member representing a different sector of the feminine spectrum, (for example Sporty Spice), adorning themselves in fashionably sexual apparel, while periodically uttering innocuous pronouncements of "girl power" is what feminism is all about. I would argue that this group's conceptions of what feminism entailed differed only in intensity from the characterizations depicted by the synchronized swimmers. In varying degrees, both groups insinuated that for women empowerment was often

associated with the sexual appeal of the female body. As both Bartky (1988) and Cole (1993) have suggested, femininity is such a potent disciplinary technology because it both rewards those that subject themselves to its regimes, while simultaneously relegating its adherents to a perpetual subjugation to the tutelage of the male gaze.

Without a doubt, there are considerable benefits to conforming to socially acceptable conceptions of femininity. However, it was apparent from the conversations with males that they too were subjected to the technologies of prototypical versions of masculinity. There were numerous stories, told by both men and women, which illustrated the array of social pressures that work to restrict the unfettered transcendence of gender boundaries. Many of the young athletic women that took part in the conversations described how their gender was questioned because of their physical competence in sport. Essentially, the gender boundaries between males and females was policed by their peerage through the threat of de-feminizing rhetoric, in the case of young girls, whereas conversely, young men were faced with emasculating judgements from their peers. For example, when one young woman described how she didn't mind playing basketball in a league of predominately males, the guys taking part in the conversation began to characterize her as a boy. The dialogue went as follows:

Kelly: I don't care, I just want to play.

Millen: You're a guy, that's why!

Kelly: Oh please! [Lightly rejects the comment]

Brett: A lot of muscles on her...

Millen: More muscles than me!

Brett: That's because you don't work out, that's why.

Interestingly, the conversation shifts from a critique of Kelly's masculinity to Millen's lack of masculinity. There are multiple discourses running through this exchange, which serve to establish the boundaries of femininity and masculinity simultaneously. Both Kelly and Millen are depicted as breaching gender guidelines, and each is discursively censured for their lack of compliance. In Millen's case, he is encouraged to develop his masculinity through weight lifting, while it is preferred that Kelly fit the typical mould of the docile feminine body; a suggestion that she refuses to acknowledge.

During a different discussion, Kelly's male peers attempted to describe how and why she played basketball. One speaker excitedly explains, "Yo, what does she do for the ball?" Another speaker answers her question; "I know, I know. She bends down, she uses her tits to get the thing." The torrent of laughter and comments this verbal exchange invoked seemed to indicate that the other members of the group shared similar notions of Kelly's athletics. In Kelly's absence, the conversationalists re-articulated her participation within a predominately male basketball league in highly sexual and feminine terms. In so doing, her athletic being is subdued to her physical body, thereby dissolving the threat she poses to the hegemonic masculinity structuring the lives of the young speakers. Furthermore, it re-establishes her femininity, thus permitting her to be the object of male affection. Just prior to the preceding quote one speaker had explained that "Usually when a girl goes to play a sport, they are really ugly, and they have muscles. . . it's sick for girls to have muscles" (one member of the group objected

adamantly to this statement). By detailing how Kelly tactically utilizes her body to participate within the sport, it is possible to sexualize her, thereby feminizing her according to the dynamics of this group of males.

Another young woman, Liz, explained how her athletic competence had earned her the distinction of being labeled a “she-man” amongst her male peers. This proved to be a source of pride for her, as she viewed the intent of the nickname positively. She stated that “It was good. . . we liked it. . . they were doing it in a joking way.” As with Kelly, Liz did not take exception to the mockery, rather assuming that the intent was harmless. Nevertheless, as can be witnessed from how the same group of guys talked when Kelly was absent, playful utterances monitoring gender boundaries may in fact have a very malicious underside. Theresa describes one such instance where she was hurt very badly when a rumour was circulated by one of her male peer questioning her femininity. She shared with us that,

there was this guy in cross-country and I used to beat him bad and he started spreading all these rumours that I was more masculine than guys. Like all these awful rumours about me just because I beat him, and he was jealous of it.

Initially, Theresa did not know who had started the fabrications concerning her gender, and it was quite bothersome to hear stories about her from all sorts of different people. Despite Theresa’s strong individual personality, even she becomes exhausted with the constant attacks her gender has to endure. She told a different story about the

guys in her school;. . . with school sports, I'll be, like, if we're playing soccer, or whatever. . . I'll go over there and try and score and I'll go around the guys if I can. But then if I start getting too physical the guys will be like, 'Quit acting like a boy! What's the matter?'" Even though Theresa retorts, "What's wrong with being a guy?", it is unlikely she is indifferent to these comments.

The social pressures to acquiesce to the feminine model are not always asserted from one's peer group. Melanie and Theresa describe how their mother advocates the athletics of their two brothers over their own sporting activities. Theresa explains,

sometimes I think my mom thinks that sports are for guys, even though she was on the National Team for volleyball. She's always supporting my brothers, and like she used to really support me in running, but this year my brother, my younger brother Dane, decided he wasn't running marathon, so she decided she wasn't going to coach our marathon team. . . but last year she was so into it. . . Dane was on my team so. . . I was just pissed. She's always going, "Oh no it's true guys are way better at sports than girls"

In this case a mother, who obviously understands the capabilities of women in elite sport, fails to convey to her daughters her support for their athletics. According to the perceptions of Melanie and Theresa, their mother, a former National Team member, would rather spend time watching her boys succeed in sport, than her girls. Regardless of whether the mother has no preference for the sports of her sons or daughters, or perhaps fails to communicate her encouragement for her daughters, I would argue that the

perceptions of Melanie and Theresa are sufficient indicators of their mothers internalization of the masculinist myth surrounding sport. If this is the case, than it is an excellent illustration of how pervasive the masculine myth is within sport that even an accomplished female athlete, and mother, is unable to unleash herself from it's ideological tentacles.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

By analyzing a series of conversations with young people from different social and geographical locations, this study has attempted to gain greater insight into how the consumption of sport, sport-related commodities, and pop-culture in general, are negotiated as young men and women struggle to construct their patterns of identification. From this exploration, there were three fundamental and inter-penetrating themes that emerged. First, the participants validated their consumption habits by describing the functional attributes of the commodities they consumed, namely comfort, quality and look. This served to defend against inferences suggesting that they may be conformists, who are mindlessly shopping according to the social seduction of the sign. Second, choice within the sphere of consumption was repeatedly cited as a moment of empowerment and individuality; whereby the participants—*anxious to characterize themselves as rational and autonomously consuming individuals*—were comfortable articulating and demonstrating their own creativity and character. Finally, the Other was essential to the self. In the process of presenting ones own identity, or the identity of a group, boundaries were established and re-established through a ceaselessly evolving depiction of the Other. None of the aforementioned themes exists on its own validity, but rather each mutually reinforcing the other, thus any accurate distinction between the three is arbitrary and only attempted for the purposes of describing the complex social phenomena under investigation.

Social Seduction versus Narratives of Comfort, Quality and Look

The dominant meanings underlying the various symbols consumed were often denounced by the participants and supplanted with a localized narrative detailing the comfort, quality or look of the article. In so doing the participants seemingly demonstrated their consumer savvy consciousness, by actively distinguishing themselves from the masses which they characterized as merely consuming the seductive properties of the sign. By simultaneously attacking the reasoning behind the consumption choices of Others, while legitimizing one's own motivations, the speaker is able to dissociate the symbol from its massified origins, re-inscribing it with more intimate association to their own life-world. John Fiske (1989) comments of the various commodities people consume, that they,

carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favour of the status quo. But hegemonic power is necessary, or even possible, only because of resistance, so these resources must also carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently in the social system. If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. (p. 2)

The pre-fabricated and dominant social meanings that are embodied in labels such as Nike, Tommy Hilfiger and FUBU are undoubtedly influential in determining why young people consume them, but not to the exclusion of other factors. With the exception of three participants, the youth never spoke of the social prestige embedded in the label when describing why they consumed the commodities they did. The material quality and the physical comfort of the product seemed to provide their consumption decisions with a tangible alibi exterior to subjective preference. Uncomfortable with merely stating that they enjoyed particular labels, they struggled to ground their choices in functional terms. Furthermore, if they were to speak of taste preferences they would be more likely to comment that they favored the look of the commodity rather than the status properties of the label. When pressured to describe what it was about the look that appealed to them they would often circle back and talk about the comfort and quality of the commodity.

As the discussions progressed it was revealed that articulating the functionality of the goods consumed was often mediated in and through the social circumstances in which the individual was located. Even concrete appeals to the comfort and quality of the commodity were not completely above social exchange. Baudrillard (1988) is helpful in dissolving the artificial distinction that is maintained between use-value, or function, and sign-value, or social desire. In so doing, he theorizes the field of consumption to be more akin to a “logic of signs” than to the functional use of objects; for Baudrillard,

objects are no longer tied to a function or to a *defined* need. This is precisely because objects respond to something different, either to a social logic, or to a

logic of desire, where they serve as a fluid and unconscious field of signification. (p. 44)

To a large degree this explains the ease with which the participants obscured the distinctions between physical and social comfort. The function of a Nike shirt, for example, is beyond the mere utilitarian purpose of covering the body, the function of the shirt also relates to its social signification capacities, which are both produced and purchased by the consumer. Therefore, “need is not a need for a particular object as much as it is a “need” for difference (the *desire for social meaning*). . .” (p. 45, Italics present in original). I would suggest that when the speakers refer to the three inter-related concepts of quality, comfort and look when describing the running shoes they wear they are at once speaking to the material quality of the shoes, which look good, thus providing both social and physical comfort. In other words, their descriptions seldom make distinctions between the connotative and denotative properties of the commodities they consume. The three concepts are thoroughly enmeshed and are variously utilized in carving themselves a niche from the multitude of goods available to them, in the process of infusing their lives with “social meaning”. I would suggest that Dick Hebdige’s (1979) concept of “bricolage” is useful in describing the manner in which the youth utilized the inter-related concepts of comfort, quality and look in describing their fashion choices. For Hebdige, bricolage was the process whereby “basic elements can be used in a variety of impoverished combinations to generate new meanings” (p. 103). Refusing to have meanings imposed upon them, the participants created their own intimate meanings from

the miniscule tools at their disposal, namely, their ability to characterize the comfort quality and look of the chosen commodity.

The findings detailed in the preceding paragraph support the work of other authors (Baudrillard, 1988; Fiske, 1989a, 1989b; Willis, 1990) in that it suggests that the distinction between the utilitarian function of objects and their associated sign values is arbitrary. Many of the young participants went to great lengths to establish the very functional purposes particular commodities served in their everyday lives. It is very likely that the sign itself has become the need or function, as Baudrillard so eloquently illustrates.

In the research conducted by Miles (1996), he attempted to draw a distinction between the material function of a commodity and its social seduction. From the research conducted in the course of my thesis, such attempts proved to be futile and the participants were quick to defend their consumer choices by referring to the very functional purposes their goods served through the implementation of the three inter-related narratives of comfort, quality and look.

Choice as a Moment of Empowerment

For the participants within the discussions, choice proved to be a key ingredient to the empowerment of the individual. The omnipresent and over-riding assumption that the ability to choose was left up to the individual seemed to superficially reassure the discussants of their authority over the field of consumption. Freedom of choice was often pointed to as a validating premise of the entire system of popular culture. However, what

emerged from the conversations revealed that there were social repercussions to singularly exercising choice. All of the discussion groups resorted to mocking particular ensemble styles, sometimes those being insulted were involved in the discussions, while in other cases the group focused their attention on people outside the group. Although the body may be free in the most basic terms there is an array of social factors that impede, or discipline, the consciousness of the individual. Nava (1987) refers to the field of consumption as an "ever-expanding discursive apparatus" (p. 206) where power is implemented through the

incitement and proliferation of increasingly detailed and comprehensive discourses. Yet because of the diffuse nature of this control, because it operates from such a multiplicity of points and is not unitary, it is also vulnerable. (207)

It is precisely the "diffuse nature" of consumption that arms the participants with the ammunition that allows them to make bold declarations detailing the freedom they derive through choice. The near limitless permutations that the consumer is able to creatively invent out of the various commodities and their associative styles, signs and personalities is certainly empowering. However, for most of those involved in the discussions, their horizon of choice was greatly narrowed by social influences, such as peer pressure (including gender, ethnic and racial affiliations) and parental approvals, while they also described tactile barriers like the threat of physical violence and economic limitations. Regardless of the experienced encumbrances and social pressures

that bounded their choices and nudged the participants towards conformity, the desire to present themselves as empowered individual consumers was an integral factor during the discussions.

When directly confronted with questions that revealed their powerlessness the participants utilized various tactics to re-interpret their lack of efficacy into issues that did not matter to them; often this was achieved by describing the situation as unalterable, therefore concern proved to be futile. Eliasoph's (1997) ethnographic investigation into how people articulate their powerlessness suggests that different groups of people represent and understand their efficacy in distinct ways. Of importance to this study is her hypothesis that people would rather preserve the standard, and widely heralded, notion of freedom and democratic choice than acknowledge the structures that bound their lives in so many ways. With respect to her study, she comments that when

faith in democracy clashed with their intuitions of powerlessness, volunteers [participants] reduced the [contradiction] by redefining democracy, narrowing its scope into ever smaller circles. This approach might say that [her participants] tied up ambivalence, anxiety, and ambiguity into tidy packages, trying hard to forget what they knew in order to protect what they believe. (p. 620).

Similarly, when the participants in my discussions spoke of themselves, they celebrated the empowerment they exercised through their consumer choices, rarely admitting that there were circumstances in their lives that impacted and confounded their

sense of consumer efficacy. However, when these same participants spoke of other consumers they tended to depict them as mindless conformists stuck in a hypnotic trance as they voraciously consumed each of the latest trends. When issues that the young men and women acknowledged to be beyond their controls did arise, such as the production histories and the artificially inflated prices of commodities, the participants de-railed these inconsistencies to their consumer authority by depicting them as too distant from their everyday lives to be worthy of their concern. This, of course, does not account for the four participants that actually stated that they both cared about where their goods were made, and were actively engaged consumer to protestations of these injustices. In other words, as Eliasoph suggested, the participants mentally severed the world, making distinctions between their immediate surroundings, over which they perceived themselves as having influence, from broader circles, where efficacy was much more difficult to actuate.

The above detailed findings are consistent with the work of Eliasoph (1997) who suggested that people use a variety of methods to defend their consciousness from recognizing their own powerlessness. The majority of the participants involved in my study chose to emphasize the empowerment they experienced within the sphere of consumption as opposed to their inability to influence, or even gain knowledge, of the exploitations that were occurring in the process of maintaining their consumer based lifestyles.

Dialectics of the Self and the Other

In order to acquire social meaning, the young participants were constantly verbalizing distinctions between themselves and their social group, and the Other. In some cases this distinguishing process involved borrowing dominant social categories, such as race and gender, while in other instances the youth produced their own micro-narratives. Regardless of the origin of the boundaries, it was apparent that in order to portray the self one was required to simultaneously map the Other. Constantly, the youth oscillated back and forth between describing what they were and characterizing what the Other was, and consequently they were not. However, the procedure of relationally defining yourself against one group of people, while at the same time aligning yourself with another is not necessarily an exact operation. Alliances evolve, contradictions emerge and more often than not compromise is part of the equation. It is for this reason that Hall (1991) and Maffesoli have suggested that academics talk more in terms of identification than identity. Far less stable than identity, the concept of identification describes the evanescent nature of clusters of people, or tribes as Maffesoli is likely to portray them, as they collectively struggle to make sense of the circumstances they create for themselves along with those that are inherited. Hall (1991) speaks to the investigative advantages of thinking in terms of identification over identity. He comments,

identity, although spoken by the subject-collective or individual-who is being positioned. . .is not a question of what the inside wants to locate. And it's not a question of how the outside, or the external dominating system, places you

symbolically: but it is precisely in the process-never complete, never whole-of identification.

Consistent with the theorizing of Hall, the individual participants in my research did not verbally present a singularly homogeneous identity. Rather, they were far more likely to draw a nuanced picture of themselves; identifying with a particular group or style in one scenario, while moments later declaring their disparities with that exact same group or style. Correspondingly, the social categories (race, gender, socio-economic status) that were externally imposed onto the youth were not passively accepted and interpreted. Rather, the individual, in consultation with a host of social factors including friendship groups and mainstream and alternative media forms, coloured these divisions in all sorts of shades in a struggle to locate themselves in a desirable position of empowerment. For Maffesoli (1991) this is a characteristic of a “postmodern society”, where within

massification, processes of condensation are constantly occurring through which more or less ephemeral tribal groupings are organized which cohere on the basis of their own minor values, and which attract and collide with each other in an endless dance, forming themselves into a constellation whose boundaries are perfectly fluid. (p. 12)⁶

Maffesoli’s depiction of a postmodern society was evident in my research. For example, the Persian community traversed between the old country and the new, at moments adamantly maintaining their traditional roots, while at other points

compromising with the cultures experienced in Canada. Similarly, a group of white participants argued that they disapproved of white youth adopting black fashion styles, yet recognized that their loose fitting clothing emerged from black rapper culture. The two illustrations I have included from my research are not isolated instances. The transitory, and sometimes contradicting, processes of identification that the young participants described, was constantly evidenced throughout the discussions I had with them.

Consistent with the work of other authors (Fiske, 1989a, 1989b; Maffesoli, 1990; Miles, 1996; Willis, 1990) it was found that peer group influences were crucial to the entire process of infusing various commodities with meaning. The definition of oneself over and against the Other, and the material maintenance of such distinctions through the use of commodities and their associated signs was an integral theme throughout the interviews. However, the meanings particular communities attributed various commodities with were not necessarily consistent with broader cultural understandings of the commodities. Rather, the group negotiated loosely defined parameters that served to simultaneously define the self and the Other.

Reflections for Further Research

One of the greatest attributes of this project also happened to be its most severe detriment. Due to the nature of the open-ended discussions the topics that arose often diverged from the stated intent of the thesis. Participants anxious to elaborate their consumer behaviours utilized all sorts of different examples outside of sport. It quickly

became apparent that to curb such distractions would not only be impossible, but would quite likely be damaging to the overall integrity of the research. However, the inclusion of such an array of topics has resulted in a finished document that does not necessarily follow a linear format. Sport is one of many cultural phenomena discussed. The difficulty I had in focusing the discussions on sport and sport alone proved that sport is indistinguishable from popular culture at large. In order to discuss sport, it was necessary for the participants to draw on all sorts of socio-cultural examples.

There are several issues that emerged from this thesis requiring greater research. First, the concept of social comfort that I have repeatedly referred to throughout the essay is in need of elaboration. Seldom did the participants mention social status, or social acceptance as being a primary reason for consuming certain brand names. However, occasionally they would refer to this notion of peer acceptance in a variety of forms. This thesis had little success at gaining greater insight into this concept of social comfort. Why is there social comfort associated with particular brand names? How does this comfort vary from one group to the next? Does social comfort work to absolve the consumer from recognizing their conformist tendencies?

Furthermore, I think it would be fascinating to study the actual symbols that are associated with sport. For example, compare the affect for the Nike swoosh versus the Olympic rings. Do the participants feel notable differences between the two icons or are they one in the same? This type of semiological analysis could potentially aid in gaining a more discernable map of the cultural locations various sport-related symbols occupy.

ENDNOTES

¹ I made no attempt to find out who had money and who did not. Some of the participants did express that they had very little spare money, but of course this is a very relative statement. Therefore, what I was more concerned with was the manner in which young people who did not consume expensive styles defended their choices.

² Although it is most likely that these street narratives concerning NHL hockey jerseys and Black rapper culture have been re-absorbed by mainstream consumer culture in its insatiable quest to produce new, street savvy fashions (see Nava, Fiske). It is ambiguous as to whether the youth in the conversation are responding to the messages of mainstream media or street culture or both.

³ I use the term material poverty to sum up the various narratives the youth utilise in describing themselves. For example, this group of ethnic Persians referred to themselves as living in the “ghetto.” According to their discussions, the “ghetto” as a concept embodied a number of elements including an ethnic minority population living in relative poverty. These are their assertions, I have no way of determining how valid they are.

⁴ In fairness to the speaker, I must attribute his usage of the term “class” to my failed attempt to describe “class” in a classical Marxist sense. If the terminology is offensive, I’m sure it is my fault.

⁵ In itself, this is interesting, because I referred to the labour problems—not child labour—which I understand, in the case of Nike, to revolve around women. The group interpreted the problem as one of child labour. There seems to be more sympathy for children when it comes to issues of labour, poverty, etc. Adult women workers do not receive the same mass media sympathies.

⁶ I understand Maffesoli’s use of the phrase “perfectly fluid” boundaries to be referring to the ever-changing definitional character of the division between the tribes. However, the participants did not describe these boundaries as being completely porous to people. The boundaries that the young speakers erected between themselves and the Other did serve an exclusionary function even though such exclusion may have been only temporary.

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APPENDIX I

Letter of Approval from the Ethics Committee



Université d'Ottawa • University of Ottawa

Faculté des sciences de la santé
Cabinet de la doyenne

Faculty of Health Sciences
Office of the Dean

March 19, 1999

Student Edward Norman
Professor Geneviève Rail
School of Human Kinetics
INTRA

Subject: **Your project entitled:** *“The role of sport commodities in youth identity formation”*

Dear Professor and Student,

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Faculty of Health Sciences, Human Research Ethics Committee, after study of the documentation provided, concluded that your project met the appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and falls within **CATEGORY 1A**.

I hereby attach a copy of the certificate of clearance granted by the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

This certificate is valid for a period of one year from the time of issuance. I would also like to remind you that, in accordance with the policies of the UHREC, it is your responsibility to notify the Committee of any major changes in this project.

On behalf of the Committee, I wish you success in your project.

Sincerely,

J. Roger Proulx, Ph.D.
Chair, Human Research Ethics Committee

APPENDIX II

Information and Consent Forms



Université d'Ottawa • University of Ottawa

Faculté des sciences de la santé
École des sciences de l'activité physique

Faculty of Health Sciences
School of Human Kinetics

LETTER OF INFORMATION

To whom it may concern,

My name is Ted Norman and I am a graduate student at the University of Ottawa. In April of this year, I will be conducting research on youth and the consumption of sports products. The official title of my study is "The role of sport commodities in youth identity formation." The study will consist of small-group interviews with high school students. Each interview will involve 4 or 5 participants and will take place over lunch hour. The interview will be audio-taped. I will be directing the interviews myself, and the format will be that of a relaxed conversation. I will intervene occasionally to clarify emerging issues and to keep the discussion progressing. I am not interested in right or wrong answers, but rather in the opinions of your child with regards to sports products (ex.: running shoes, baseball caps, professional sports jerseys, etc.). The study will help us to understand youth culture and the meaning of sports products to the students. A one page summary of the results of the study will be made available to those who participate. These results will speak of youth in general and as far as your child is concerned, anonymity and confidentiality will be respected. This means that any information that may lead to the identification of your child will be erased from the results. Furthermore, the tape-recorded interviews will be used only by me and will be locked away at the University during the study (they will be destroyed after the study).

The decision to participate, or decline to take part in the study, is left completely up to you and your child. Furthermore, you should be aware that your child will be speaking in front of his/her peers which may cause feelings of discomfort. However, often such interviewing environments prove beneficial for the participant as well as the researcher. This study has been approved by the University of Ottawa's ethics committee and has met the standards of the North York YMCA. If you are interested in the results of the study, I will be more than happy to forward you a summary of the results. Just contact me at the number below.

If you are willing to have your son or daughter participate in my study, please read the attached consent form, sign it, and give it back to your child who will return it to me.

This research is part of the necessary requirements of a Master's degree and is under the direction of Dr. Genevieve Rail. Please feel free to contact either myself, Ted (416) 469-9530 or Genevieve (613) 562-5800 ext. 4257 with any questions or concerns.

Thanks in advance for your help in this project,

Ted Norman, B.A.
797 Broadview Avenue Apt. #2
Toronto, ON
M4K 2P8



Université d'Ottawa • University of Ottawa

Faculté des sciences de la santé
École des sciences de l'activité physique

Faculty of Health Sciences
School of Human Kinetics

CONSENT FOR AN INTERVIEW

Purpose of the Project

To discover through interview sessions how young people use and relate to sports products in the process of coming to understand themselves and those around them.

Procedure

Small Group Discussions: In small groups of 4-5 students the participants will be asked questions designed to spark group discussions relating to sports products. Depending on the group, the participants may be of mixed gender and ethnicity. The questions will revolve around issues of how the individual incorporates the sporting products into their everyday lives and how this interaction affects their perception of themselves and those around them. The sessions will last approximately 30-60 minutes during regularly scheduled programming.

Consent

I hereby authorize my child to participate in the research being conducted by Ted Norman of the School of Human Kinetics at the University of Ottawa. I further grant permission for my child to take part in the tape recording of my child's participation in a small-group interview. I acknowledge that the nature and purpose of my child's participation in the study have been fully explained to me and that Ted Norman has offered me the opportunity to answer any questions which I may ask about the procedure to be followed. I am aware that there is a level of discomfort involved in this study that my child may experience that is consistent with speaking in front of his/her peers. I have been made fully aware that I may report any incidences that violated my child's welfare to the University of Ottawa Human Research Ethics Committee. I understand that I may withdraw this permission at any time and that any recordings of my child's participation will be erased at once upon my request without fear of reprisal. I also understand that all materials collected as a result of my child's participation will be used only for research purposes, that they will be available only to responsible professionals and that my child's anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times. I freely and voluntarily consent to allow my child to take part in this research project. I understand that I sign both copies, and keep one for my records. If I have any questions, comments or concerns, I can contact Ted Norman, Dr. Geneviève Rail or Dr. Roger Proulx, the chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Ottawa at the addresses listed below.

Signature of parent or guardian

Date

Signature of participant

Date

Ted Norman
Geneviève Rail, PhD
School of Human Kinetics
University of Ottawa
Tel: (613) 562-5800 X 4257
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Dr. Roger Proulx
Chair
Faculty of Health Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee
Ottawa, Ontario, K1H 8M5
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APPENDIX III

Group Discussion Guide

Group Discussion Guide

1. What sports do you play? Why?
2. What kind of sporting goods (commodities) do you buy/have/want to have? Why?
3. What kind of sports do you like to watch on T.V./hear on radio/follow in the newspaper? Why?
4. How much money do you spend approximately per month on sports stuff? Why?
5. How does buying/consuming things make you feel? Why?
6. Who influences what type of things you buy/consume? (probe: parents, friends, sales people, advertisements, celebrity endorsements, etc.)
7. Who or what limits what you buy/consume? (probe: parents, money, friends, etc.)
8. Does the label or brand name of the sports product make a difference to you? Why?
9. Do commercials affect the way you feel about the products you are buying? Why?
10. Are individuals judged on the types of clothes they wear? What about you?
11. Is it possible to determine which group of people a person hangs out with by the clothes they wear?
12. If you had more money what types of things would you buy/consume?
13. How much is too much for a pair of running shoes?
14. Do you think that what you purchase/consume/watch/read is different from what (girls/boys) purchase/consume/watch/read? If so, why?
15. Would you buy a sports product that was endorsed by a (man/women)? Why/why not?

16. Who are your sports heroes? Why?