

# **Meccsa Presentation**

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## ***Consuming Brands***

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## Introduction – Consuming Brands

My research addresses the relative absence of empirical study of young people's subjective relationship with and use of branded goods. As Lury points out, brands are complex objects, central nodes of 'qualitative'<sup>1</sup> value and social exchange, in the global economy. As multi-dimensional forms their use embraces all of Bourdieu's capital: symbolic, cultural, social and economic. Yet outside of market research little work has been done to examine the varied dimensions of young people's relationship with and use of branded goods.

Klein's *No Logo* shows how the global corporations attempts to 'cool hunt'<sup>2</sup> street culture can be resisted by using the signifiatory power of brands, their 'loglo'<sup>3</sup> against them, but her analysis focuses on key actors from ad execs to activists. Goldman and Papson's *Nike Culture*, offers a rich textual deconstruction of the Nike brand, elaborating the many signifiatory mobilizations of the swoosh, from hope of individual transcendence of poverty, to race empowerment. 'But,' these authors ask 'what of the gap between image and practice'?'<sup>4</sup>

It is this gap, in the subjective meaning and experience of brands, which my study addresses, exploring the space between subjectivity as hailed and lived. My focus therefore is on how young consumers' negotiate the classifications of the consumer provided in marketing, and popular media discourses, and how they relate to these attempts at subjectification or ideological interpellation. In short how young consumers occupy the space of the consuming self.

My overarching research question then is, *What is the relationship between young people's consumption of branded goods and their sense of identity?*<sup>5</sup> Today I will focus on three findings. Firstly, the importance of class position, secondly, young consumers' discourse on gender and, thirdly, the issue of bullying which arises across the groups. Prior to this, I'll briefly outline my research design and then map out the key results thus far before addressing class, gender and bullying.

### 1. Method and Research Design

Combining twenty focus groups<sup>6</sup>, of 3-6 sixteen to nineteen year olds<sup>7</sup>, from FE Colleges and Sixth Form's in East London, Essex and Hertfordshire, with a version of critical discourse analysis<sup>8</sup>, the groups were gender segregated (bar two) to focus on variables of class background and gender primarily.<sup>9</sup> The advantages<sup>10</sup> of focus groups, Kitzinger<sup>11</sup> argues, are participants can engage in group interaction, producing shared understandings of every day uses and meanings of things. In practice the participants' enthusiasm produced a rich discourse. Discussion of how they understood and classified brands broadened to how they often classified, labeled and typed themselves and others – in relation to brands and branded goods.

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<sup>1</sup> Lury C, (2004) *Brands The Logos Of The Global Economy* Routledge London - For example on p6 Lury refers to 'the multi-layered character of the brands ontological existence' as a 'dynamic platform or support for existence'

<sup>2</sup> Klein N, (2000) *No Logo Taking Aim At The Brand Bullies* Flamingo London – Thus pp72-73 refers to 'change agents' who 'trailed the scent of cool' anywhere and everywhere

<sup>3</sup> Klein Ibid (2000) 'Brands detractors' can 'benefit from the loglo' and are able to 'enjoy it's light' even as they attack it pp348-349

<sup>4</sup> Goldman R and Papson S, (1998) *Nike Culture* Sage London p 184.

<sup>5</sup> Slater D, (1997) *Consumer Culture and Modernity* Polity Cambridge - Debates in the study of consumption have tended to polarize around the question, as Slater frames it, 'Are consumers really free or really manipulated?'<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there are opposing takes on consumption but framing the debate dichotomously in this way, I would argue, caricatures many positions. The more fruitful approach, in my view, is to assess the extent to which, and how, consumption can be both enabling and constraining.

<sup>6</sup> See Merton R K and Kendall P L, (1946) *The Focused Interview* *American Journal Of Sociology* (51:541 – 557)

<sup>7</sup> A target age group for 'coolhunters' e.g. see Quart A, (2003) *Branded The Buying & Selling of Teenagers* Arrow London

<sup>8</sup> Fairclough N, (1992) *Discourse and Social Change* Polity Oxford – My work *critically* adapts aspects of his method particularly of 'Textual Practice' i.e. analysis of i) vocabulary ii) figures of speech iii) mode of address iv) modality

<sup>9</sup> The purposive sample frame, targeted 'key informants', see May and Pope (BMJ 1995; 311:109-112), since brand awareness and expenditure on branded clothing is high in this age group a key target for 'coolhunters.'

<sup>10</sup> The disadvantages included keeping participants focused. Thus I made use of a four part interview guide drawing on Merton, including fixed sets of open questions combined with discussion of ads and brand logos as simple tasks.

<sup>11</sup> Kitzinger J, *Introducing focus groups* in (BMJ 1995:311 299-302)

My methodological approach both uses focus groups and, is concerned with how subjects are formed within groups. It allows the tensions, contradictions and negotiations between moments of subjective identification and dis-identification with brands - and the values, qualities, and ideologies they signify as well as the types, groups and stereotypes they are linked to - to be studied in a peer context. For example, in this group<sup>12</sup>, of male FE students from an Essex town, discussion of 'Essex Boys' erupts when the Burberry brand is mentioned.

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

P  
stuff innit

Attractive

Mi Really good stuff

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

ALL HA HA HA

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

B Ha ha ha

P Don't wanna be lumped in with that

Thus thoughts about Burberry emerge collectively and dialogically, with appeals to: shared feelings- *'but now like cor imagine wearing it'* and established reservoirs of assumptions - thus the unanimous burst of laughter about *'typical Essex boy'*. Yet contradictory awareness of problems around stereotyping is implied in this statement's modality - *'I'm not saying typical from Essex but'* and the final distancing device, *'I'm from Essex but I don't'* etc.

## 2. Overview/ Map Of First Results' Chapter

The overall picture emerging from analysis of the first ten focus groups is: firstly, a strong discourse around class emerges, with 'choice' of brands provoking concern about social status and position. Secondly, brands aren't just seen as categories of goods which mark out differing class positions. More specifically they are seen as marking out and classifying class inflected groups and stereotypes, such as *'Townies'*, *'Rude'* or *'Essex Boys'* and *'Girls'*. Branded goods contribute to the materialisation of these class and gender stereotypes. As one participant says, *'they help us to class ourselves.'*

Thirdly, the key perceptual axis for organizing these types, the criteria for membership of these groups, is a dividing line which pits the 'respectable' against 'the rough'. Discussing 'Essex boy' stereotypes O<sup>13</sup> says *'see some one with a Burberry hat whether or not they are you just think twat.'* Here discourse about class meets discourse about gender. Fourthly, intensified practices of looking - an anxious preoccupation with both looking at other others and being looked at - emerge. Finally, the most recurring theme of all, anxiety about being bullied for your choice of brands. So to the findings I want to look at today, and firstly to those that relate to class.

### 3. (i) Results – Class discourse – A lexicon of class inflected terms

Across the groups, whether young women of working class backgrounds from, in and around, Walthamstow in East London or middle class young men and women from Herts, a lexicon of class terms emerges when discussing brands. Amongst young women from working class backgrounds in

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<sup>12</sup> Focus group [5.HEM] more specifically is a group made up of six young men all FE students from an Essex town - one mixed race, one of Chinese origin and four white

<sup>13</sup> (ibid)

the Walthamstow<sup>14</sup> area, the words ‘rich’ ‘posh’ and ‘expensive’ reoccur. Wearing Versace or Moschino Cl ‘feels posh’. Amongst the Herts young women from middle class family backgrounds<sup>15</sup> ‘rich’, ‘poor’, ‘class’ and ‘lower class’ are repeated. For young men, from the same Herts Sixth form<sup>16</sup>, - concern about class is indexed by their use of ‘rich’, ‘poor’, ‘quality’, ‘fake’, ‘cheap’ ‘look wealthy’; ‘high-class’ and ‘your average everyday sort of person.’

### Perceptions of class position and status in relation to brands

Working class young women from Walthamstow say their high end consumption remains limited. Looking up at others, J says, Gucci are for ‘you know the men that have got all the nice cars, they’re like for more them kinda people.’ For [2. HW], a group of Herts women, their time is spent looking down as well as up. J says, wearing fakes gives the game away. ‘I think that some of the [fake] brands look tacky cos you just like think I’ve got it and you know they can’t afford it and they know you know it’s fake it looks tacky like the Burberry stuff.’ But there is reproach for those they look up at too.

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

**A** Yeah some people like

**JS** they feel unhappy

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

**JS** Like money orientated

In, Veblenesque terms, A<sup>17</sup> a young man from the same Herts Sixth Form notes the pressure to exhibit ‘pecuniary decency’, ‘there are those in poor areas in Tesco’s who try and buy like the higher ranges...to try and make themselves look big’. and C, from another Herts Sixth Form group<sup>18</sup>, explains how he sees things ‘if you spend all that money on a prime good you want people to know.’

### Who buys inferior brands?

For L, from a group of young women Sixth Formers in Walthamstow,<sup>19</sup> Hi Tec and Diadora have, as she puts it, ‘just got this trailer trash look you just see like trailer trashy people wearing them too bad but it’s true. Class distinction in relation to brands develops further in a group of six young men, FE students from Essex,<sup>20</sup> who specifically name brands considered inferior, and embarrassing and who their benighted consumers might be.

Thus the ‘types’ of consumers who might choose ‘cheap’ brands includes ‘skanky birds’, ‘hooligans’, ‘riff raff’ and ‘Essex boys’ as well as the ‘poor’<sup>21</sup>. Analysis of modality, the degree to which participants identify with or are averse to particular brands, shows Asda’s ‘George’ brand provokes a mix of emphatic rejection, laughter and melodramatic metaphor

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

**O** Ha Ha Ha

**C** or George

<sup>14</sup> Focus group [1. WW] four young women, all FE students from in and around Walthamstow in East London

<sup>15</sup> Focus group [2. HW] five young women, from middle class families, all sixth formers from Hertfordshire

<sup>16</sup> Focus group [3. HM ] six “ men “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “ “

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Focus group [4. CHM] three young men, “ “ “ “ “ Herts sixth form students

<sup>19</sup> Focus group [19. WSW] five young women, from all Sixth Formers from the Walthamstow area

<sup>20</sup> Focus group [5. HEM] six young men, all FE students from an Essex town

<sup>21</sup> Focus group [19. WSW] five young women, all Sixth Formers from the Walthamstow area

B George

P George Ha ha ha

All Ha Ha Ha

T Why not?

ALL HA HA HA HA

B I would just get shot

### 3.(ii) How Class meets Gender - 'Skanky Birds'?

Amongst one mixed gender group<sup>22</sup>, discourse on class meets gender. Thus D's comments about decent brands elicit agreement from A, one of two young women.

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

A Not skank

For Skeggs<sup>23</sup> 'respectability' is the class infused concept often desired by working class women as signifier of the subject position which announces they have secured themselves the socially acceptable identity, and sanctioned status, of 'decent' women. Across several groups 'skank' is a word used to describe some young women pejoratively and offensively, linking 'poor' and 'cheap' clothes brands to 'rough and ready' women. Amongst one group of young men from Essex<sup>24</sup> 'skanky birds' are described as those that put 'you in mortal' and who are 'scrubberish.' Thus poorer young women, those who are seen to dress 'cheap' are deemed to be socially worth less; sexually easy and the dialogical other of richer respectable women. As Skeggs argues:

The classification by and of the working classes into rough and respectable has a long history..... To not be respectable is to have little social value or legitimacy.<sup>25</sup>

Choice of brands or the lack of them 'classifies' into rough and respectable, in gender and sexual, as well as class terms. A further difficulty for young women's negotiation of the ideological values, social categories and labels brands evoke is outlined by another young woman, J, for whom a man in a Versace suit is 'minted'. But J says

I dunno you wouldn't necessarily turn around and say oh like he's really stuck up and that like he's a horrible person but if you saw a girl like from head to toe wearing names like £300 earrings and stuff then you'd just think oh she's massively stuck up.

Thus, the differential judgments applied in gender terms, to dressing 'posh' and appearing 'minted', mean young women occupy impossibly contradictory subject positions. Being too 'posh' or 'skank', are both equally risky socially.

### 3. (iii) Bullying and Brands

Moving to conclude bullying, seems most likely then if your dress in brands goes too high or low. A<sup>26</sup>, from a group of men from an Essex town, complains if 'you can't afford a particular brand...people will take the mickey out of you'. And J, from a group of young women, FE students from Walthamstow<sup>27</sup> argues,

oh some people go oh where did you buy that top from if you go down the market they go oh you should have been in Blah do Blah shop you're just being cheap and having knock off

<sup>22</sup> Focus Group Six [6.HEMX] mixed gender, two young men & young women FE students from a town in Essex

<sup>23</sup> Skeggs B, (1997) *Formations Of Class and Gender Becoming Respectable* Sage London pp161-162

<sup>24</sup> Focus group Five [5. HEM] five young men from a town in Essex, all FE students

<sup>25</sup> Skeggs B, (1997) *Ibid* p3

<sup>26</sup> Focus group Seven [7.BEM] three young men from an Essex town all FE students

<sup>27</sup> Focus group Eight [8. WW ] five young women from the Walthamstow area all FE Students

Finally, S explains<sup>28</sup>

....last year I was wearing a top and it was supposed to be a Nike one but it was spelt wrong and it said **nine** ..... I got really kind of bullied.

Te a young man from a Walthamstow Sixth Form<sup>29</sup> sums Nike's success up, in this context.

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

Nike for many teenagers is the 'up to the standard brand' a sign of 'decency', 'respectability' and 'normality' under a 'brand canopy' or 'habitus' which promises a redoubt, in which you might assuage anxiety, or as several participants put it, '*feel at home*' [18.WSM] (S28) and safe from the risky negotiation of the assumptions and social labels which accompany consuming brands. Thus as R, a young man from one of the Herts Sixth Forms, puts it.

R [3.HM] I think that by going with like an established brand you're sort of quite safe...if you're wearing well known clothes then you can't sort of get bullied because everyone knows that you're sort of like mainstream.

Yet the problem is, as one discussant aptly comments, '*the good things [about brands] are the bad things*,' [18.WSM] From feeling at home, to feeling a 'clone' or a 'lemming,' as the discussants put it, the classifying power of the brand rebounds on those who chose it. Feeling 'at home' can turn into feeling 'controlled' and 'homely' inclusion in groups vies with the threat of exclusion. And one can easily become the object of the very stereotypes which you have subjected others to. Thus, for example, O's dilemma in the first extract and his keenness to avoid implicating himself in the very stereotypes he discursively contributes to, '*I'm from Essex but.*'

## Conclusion

Finally, how young consumers choose branded commodities, seems framed by anxiety about the way such choices impact on their own understanding, and others perceptions, of their class and status. Bourdieu's argument 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier'<sup>30</sup> continues to apply to contemporary consumption.

Concerns about class, position and social standing, indexed through perceptions of taste and respectability and displayed through choice of brands, form a powerful ideological framework within which choices about which brands, to avoid, and which branded goods to buy, and consume are made. The accounts of the classifications of both branded goods and people given above, and of the difficulties of living with and negotiating brand related stereotypes - including the possibility of being bullied - are a corrective to accounts which have over emphasised the possibilities for agency afforded by consumption. The complexity of those possibilities for agency - which the next chapter of my findings addresses - of striving to be more than either a 'demographic for Nike or thought of as a hooligan', as Quart puts<sup>31</sup> it, can only be properly assessed if, as against more celebratory postmodern accounts of cultures of consumption, critical analysis keeps in it's frame of reference the continuing constraining and disciplinary dynamics of consumption.

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<sup>28</sup>In the above group 'cheap', 'knockoff', 'fake', 'popular', 'real', 'nasty' and 'dodgy' all exhibit discursive connotations of anxiety about social status.

<sup>29</sup> Focus group [20. WSM] four young men Sixth Formers from the Walthamstow area

<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu P, (2000) [1986] *Distinction A Social Critique of The Judgement of Taste* Routledge London p6

<sup>31</sup> Quart A,(2003) *Ibid* p288