Silencing the everyday experiences of youth? - Issues of subjectivity, corporate ideology and popular culture in the English classroom.

MEd (Research) thesis by Glenn Savage

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education (Research) at Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, May 2006.

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of popular culture texts on the subjectivities of young people and argues that critical pedagogical practices need to be further deployed by English teachers in response to the corporate-driven nature of popular texts. Three levels of synthesized information are presented, using data analysis born of a quantitative survey and in-depth interviews with a group of secondary English students in Perth, Australia.

Firstly, I argue that popular culture texts constitute the predominate form of consumed textual material for young people and that these texts are increasingly defined by corporate ideologies and branding. Secondly, I investigate the influence that these popular culture texts have on the subjectivities and everyday social experiences of young people. I argue that the ideologies and discourses in popular texts position young people to assume subjectivities that are increasingly defined by branding and corporate ideology, and that these texts often have a normalizing effect. Hence, I argue that young people’s social currency is often defined by the extent to which individuals demonstrate an alliance to the ideologies of popular media, and that individuals who deviate from such popular norms often experience subjugation and exclusion within peer and social settings. Constructivist notions of subjectivity and an analytical framework heavily influenced by Foucauldian theory inform this theorization. Thirdly, I finalize my argument by dealing pedagogically with subject English and areas of it that hold relevance in terms of the integration and analysis of ‘the popular’; including critical literacy, multiliteracies and critical pedagogy. I argue that a commitment to critically analyzing popular culture texts in the subject is lacking and that students feel many English teachers are “out of touch” with the everyday realities of young people and their popular culture influences. I argue that such failures risk producing students whose everyday experiences are silenced and who are unaware of the ways they are being positioned to adopt certain corporate-driven subjectivities.

Methodologically this study is informed by principles of critical theory, cultural studies, discourse analysis and a commitment to position the often-silenced student voice as a prime analytical tool. Aspects of autoethnography are deployed through punctuating personal narratives that feature within this text in order to illuminate the journey of self-realization and fundamental self re-evaluation I have traveled throughout the production of this research work.
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They continued to dance in the dimness to that mad rush of sound which was somehow like a torrent, and it was to Rosemary as though she hovered on the edge of a whirling vortex into which sooner or later she was bound to be drawn.

Ethel M. Dell, The Gate Marked Private

Of late, I have come to understand life as a series of routine banalities, punctured by inspired moments of epiphanic surreality, that keep the ball rolling and the motivation to move forward real and driven with a sense of purpose. I was in a pub in the student quarter of Dublin when I discovered this quote, at a time of most significance, when grappling with a range of issues and at a time when I was finding it most difficult to conceptualize the direction of my research degree. I had surveyed a range of issues pertaining to popular culture, subculture, critical literacy and subject English, and I knew I was close to the heart of my interest—yet I was still struggling to define my purpose, my essential polemic for the next year of research. In context, Ethel M. Dell, the famous early 19th century romance novelist, refers specifically to the character Rosemary and her looming appearance in the limelight of the tantalizing dance floor of romance and allure, yet when held purposefully into the light of my own emerging paradigmatic location, the quote illuminated for me the crux of what many months of thinking had thus far failed to achieve, allowing me to begin framing my theoretical purpose. I realized that paramount to all other issues to which I had been drawn, it was in fact this ‘whirling vortex’ that held many of the answers.

Analogously, as I sat there styled and refined in what I thought was my new North-London living, bohemian artsy-20s demeanour, I wondered what was it about the whirling vortex of fashion, popular culture and image to which I was always, frequently and inevitably drawn. I
caught a glimpse of myself as Rosemary, bonded and lustfully transfixed to a lifetime of whirling pop-culture allure, and then more sadly, as a 25 year old who had suddenly realized a majority of his sense of self, concept of cool, value systems and ideologies had been inscribed by the desires of an ever-changing and frequently appealing set of subcultural and pop-cultural choices. But who or what was it that laid out for me these choices? From where did I develop these rules for self-conceptualization? Very quickly, my suspicions turned to a few obvious creators: the media, the brand, the company and the market. I realized that in hybrid form, they had created the vortex. I started to wonder if I was only a 15yr old punk rock teenager because the Sex Pistols and new-wave punk rock had media resurgence in the early 90s. If I was, had all of that empowerment through ‘anarchy’ and power-chords been fraudulent? I wondered whether or not I spent years of my life as a young Australian obsessed with Britain—eventually to relocate to London—only because of my deep obsession with mid-90s Brit-pop culture and skilfully marketed Beatles come-back fever?

As I sat and mulled over the intricacies of my life-long obsession with the pleasure and pain of the popular, I caught a glimpse of my feet. I was wearing Birkenstock sandals. They were expensive despite their comfort, and I had bought them two weeks earlier. I realized plainly that in buying those Birkenstocks I had bought far more than a sandal—I had bought a class asset, a European-summer middle-class accessory. I had remembered seeing an advertisement for the sandals in Covent Garden a few months earlier, and I had remembered seeing a dapper artsy looking 30s-something family man wearing a pair as he alighted his elite Hampstead Heath property. His wife was great looking; the kids went to ritzy private schools, no doubt. They were leather sandals. No they were not. They were Birkenstocks.
Moving upwards in my frenetic combing of the self, I noticed that I was wearing Pop designer jeans, the London vintage boutique. I was wearing a belt from TopShop that fitted perfectly with the new-rock big belt buckle 2004 look. I was wearing a Fred Perry polo—undoubtedly the coolest British sport company since the 1960s. And the hair? Obviously: Stone Roses, circa 1992.

It was, as you can imagine, with an acute sense of horror and perturbed delight that the clarity of these realizations came into being. I had subtly possessed these suspicions throughout an undergraduate degree in Cultural Studies, throughout years of working as a music critic and journalist for art and culture magazines, yet somehow the pieces had never snapped together with such lucidity. I have never considered myself naive, however, it takes a certain reflective strength I feel to finally turn the lens 180 degrees and posit oneself as the object in question. I’m sure some people never really do.

At the time, in that pub in Dublin, I felt cheated, yet strangely empowered, and hence, the political in me rose with vengeance, and my purpose took focus in a more obvious sense than ever before. I also realized that my dissertation was now going to be far more than just an academic work. It was going to be a narrative, a story; it was going to be my story, representing the dichotomous war-zone of self that has plagued my system like a virus for many years.

Two years on, this dissertation now represents the birthing of a new self; a critical self that heads forth into the future with many new hopes, yet many painful memories. The critique of popular culture and its multifarious corporate ideologies has, for this researcher, involved a unique ‘critique of the self’ and at each stage the previously silenced chapters of my subjectivity have revealed themselves under the harsh exposing light of a fresh critical model. In order to rediscover myself as such, each stage of the journey has required a re-evaluation and re-
conceptualization of my own location within broader concepts of what it means to be, and a repositioning of myself in terms of a new mould of thinking about self, society, ideology, politics, subculture, corporate influence, and the ongoing illusionary truth of life and language. As I submit this work, I am still, in some ways, a living contradiction. But the tide is changing, and each day, a new frontier emerges.

I LOVE POPULAR CULTURE

I HATE POPULAR CULTURE

I AM POPULAR CULTURE

I AM NOT POPULAR CULTURE.

WE ARE ALL POPULAR CULTURE

WE ARE ALL MORE THAN POPULAR CULTURE

SOURCE: My study notes: December 2004
The (Formal) Introduction.

This study investigates the influence of popular culture texts on the subjectivities of young people and argues that critical pedagogical practices need to be further deployed by English teachers in response to the corporate-driven nature of popular texts. In doing so, three levels of synthesized information are presented. Firstly, I argue that today’s youth are drenched in the ideologies of corporate-driven popular culture texts to an extent previously unimaginable, due to the fact that popular culture texts constitute the predominate form of consumed textual material for young people, and that these texts are increasingly defined by corporate ideologies and branding.

Secondly, I attempt to gauge the influence that popular culture has on the subjectivities and everyday social experiences of young people, arguing that the ideologies and discourses in popular texts position young people to assume subjectivities that are increasingly defined by corporate ideologies. I also argue that popular culture texts can often have a normalizing effect on the everyday lives of young people and that the social currency of youth is often defined by the extent to which individuals demonstrate an alliance to the ideologies of popular media. Constructivist notions of subjectivity and an analytical framework heavily influenced by Foucauldian theory inform this theorization. Thirdly, I finalize my argument by dealing pedagogically with subject English and areas of it that hold relevance in terms of the integration and analysis of ‘the popular’; including critical literacy, multiliteracies and critical pedagogy. As an English teacher, I position the English classroom as a key site for empowering critical discourse to take place and produce knowledge in terms of student opinion regarding the study of popular culture texts in the subject. I argue that a commitment to critically analyzing popular culture texts in the subject is lacking and that students feel many English teachers are “out of touch” with the everyday realities of young people and their popular culture influences. I argue that such failures risk producing students whose everyday experiences are silenced and who are unaware of the
ways they are being positioned to adopt certain corporate-driven subjectivities. This three-tier synthesis of information is reflected in both the literature review and the data analysis, allowing information to be digested in a logical fashion.

In addition, an overarching meta-narrative guides the course of this dissertation, deployed through punctuating autoethnographic styled ‘stories’ that feature in order to illuminate the journey of self-realization and fundamental self re-evaluation I have traveled throughout the production of this research work. *My story* is a crucial element to this thesis as it is analogous of the ‘journey of empowerment’ I believe subjects can travel when positioned to critically consider the influence of popular culture and corporate ideology on their lives. This ‘coming of age’ journey begins in a Dublin pub and ends in a Sydney apartment block and charts the unsympathetic journey of self-deconstruction to which I have been subject in exploring a discourse of erudition so close to home. This research burns close to the bones of my soul and has altered my own subjectivity beyond compare, and the narratives reflect my journey from a ‘former self’ lost in popular media, to a more resistant critical self now open to considering new possibilities and eager to forge new frontiers. As such, it is from *within* the hourglass, not through, that I stage this analysis; far from the ‘distant outsider’ perspective so common in academic work.

The context and significance of the study

The fuel and desire to investigate the many relationships between popular culture, corporate ideology, subjectivity and pedagogical practice really came to life when I was conducting preliminary research for this dissertation in a multi-ethnic comprehensive girls’ school in south London—at which I was employed at the time. This was several months after the ‘Dublin Pub
Epiphany’ and my hope was to survey the textual consumption patterns of my year 10 students, and talk to them about their experiences with popular culture deconstruction in subject English. At the time I was reading a lot of anti-branding literature and in conducting the surveys I was slowly framing the polemic of this final dissertation. In retrospect, I admit that I was hoping to uncover a plethora of pop-culture textual saturation in the lives of my students, and fortunately I was thoroughly validated in this expectation. In fact, I was remarkably shocked by the literality and severity with which students relied on music, fashion magazines, tabloid newspapers, and forms of net-zines and other online material as their principal forms of textual intake. In addition, my findings highlighted the extent to which texts of the literary canon and even popular novels were absent within their out-of-school discourse. It appeared that the only time students accessed traditional texts was during school, and that these texts were in many cases the only texts of concern within their English class. I drew the preliminary conclusion that the textual worlds inhabited by my students out-of-class may be in direct opposition to those provided in English classes. In addition, I decided that the existence of non-critical teacher pedagogies in combination with the school’s own interpretation of the UK National Curriculum seemed to silence the popular texts that constituted the everyday interests of its clientele.

During interviews, ‘the London girls’ spoke aggressively, often voicing their disdain of English as a subject, and expressing disillusionment with the subject’s lack of scope and its aberration from validating the texts from which they regularly drew pleasure and meaning. Furthermore, students did not express a desire for the study of traditional texts to be abolished; rather they merely voiced a distaste of the fact that they simply did not at all study any popular culture at school. In almost all cases, students demanded a broadening of scope, arguing quite fluently that the relevance of many of the texts they studied was feeble at most.
Although preliminary and somewhat haphazard, these interviews were also illuminating in terms of the way the young women with whom I spoke validated the deep suspicions I was beginning to harbor regarding the problematic elements born of a life saturated with popular branded media. For many months after the research, the voices of my participants continued to simmer in my mind, and eventually the angle of my gaze as an informed social observer (Patton, 2002: 5) shifted. I started to view everyday situations through a new critical lens. Overheard locker chats, lunch-time musings and pre-class natter in hallways and classrooms suddenly appeared drenched in branded influence, and students seemed to be eternally negotiating their locations in a teenage world predominately concerned with fashion items, subculture-driven peer groups, teen magazines, reality TV, a magnanimous consumption of High Street beauty products, and endless other commodity-driven popular influences. The eternal refinement tête-à-tête in promotion of the everlasting personal quest for the fashionable teenage self no longer seemed natural—and in retrospect, I wonder how it ever could have. Such is the bitter pain of realization.

Soon enough my confusion gave way to an attempt to begin framing this problem analytically, and I realized the specific direction that my dissertation would follow. Around this time I stumbled upon the following quote:

> [R]eaders and creators of text use the medium to socially negotiate a sense of self, others, and of the world. They make explicit connections between an event described in a text and their own life experience; they may explore the self through a juxtaposition with texts, noticing and concluding personal insights… (Barrell and Hamment, 1999: 26)
Not only did my own experiences attest this to be the case, but so too did my extensive reading and growing knowledge of Foucauldian theory. In the case of my London students—whose textual consumption patterns predominately consisted of a diet of pop-culture—I wondered how their life experiences and ideologies were being informed by texts that were in most cases market-driven. If texts that they commonly juxtaposed were no more than glossy brand-laden magazines, reality TV shows, and sexed-up video clips—all thick with normalizing hegemonic versions of gender, anatomy and the like—then what personal insights were produced in the minds of these young women? What were their perceived notions of self and social reality?

A storm of questions rapidly ensued, such as: In these commercially drenched times what types of subject positions are predominately made available to young people through the products and ideologies of popular culture? How do young people position themselves in relation to these ideologies? How significant are these popular texts and ideologies in terms of the formation of individual subjectivities? Where does subject English fit in light of these issues? Do educators deploy methods of critical practice and posit educational experiences as potential sites of critical resistance to these seemingly pervasive texts?

In sum, I realized I had discovered the makings of a thesis.

Framing the current study

This dissertation and research builds upon questions and data born of the preliminary London research, yet frames the analysis within an Australian context and in light of my developing knowledge and further reading in the relevant research areas.
Data in this study has been gathered in two stages at a multi-ethnic inner suburban coeducational government high school in Perth, Australia. An initial quantitative survey of thirty year 11 students was conducted, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews with five case study participants who volunteered from the initial thirty-student sample. This study posits the student voice as a prime data collection and analysis method, and as a result, the qualitative interview data features heavily in data analysis.

Structurally, this dissertation begins by immersing the reader in the second of my brief personal narratives, to illustrate the ways that popular culture so deeply informed my formative years and to elucidate how the paradoxical backdrop of schooling worked to silence these interests. A theory chapter (Chapter 1) follows, designed to establish conjectural links between the concepts of subjectivity, popular culture and corporate ideologies. This theory chapter is an indispensable precursor to the data analysis in terms of specifically detailing my theoretical perspective regarding the ways I have utilized Foucauldian theories of subjectivity to investigate the effects of branding and corporate ideologies on the subjectivities of youth. A formal literature review (Chapter 2) follows, in which I systematically canvas empirical research in relation to the three levels of information with which this dissertation is concerned: student textual consumption patterns, the influence of popular culture texts and corporate ideologies on the subjectivities of young people, and the use of popular culture in the English classroom. Following this, Chapter 3 deals specifically with methodology, during which I define the major influences that inform my methodological position, articulate my interpretive framework and detail the mixed-methods approach with which I approached data collection. My third personal narrative is then included to establish the complex and dislocated pedagogical position I have come to inhabit as an adult and as an educator. This is followed by a reasonably politicized and detailed data analysis (Chapter 4) in which I utilize both quantitative and qualitative data in order to clearly analyze and synthesize the three levels of
information guiding the polemic of this research text. A fourth and final punctuating personal narrative then features in conjunction with the formal conclusion, to illuminate the fresh and subversive position I have adopted as a result of this research journey; detailing my burgeoning optimism regarding the potential for subject English to harbor seeds of transformative change by emerging as a site of resistance to the limiting subject positions of corporate ideology.

In creating this work, it is my hope that I will open up space for further dialogue to take place within the cultural studies and education paradigms regarding a range of issues including: youth subjectivities, popular culture, branding, corporate ideology, critical literacy and critical pedagogy. I believe this dissertation offers interesting evidence of the powerful ways the subjectivities of young people are influenced by popular culture, and I hope this will feed into devising pedagogical practices better designed to engage students in the critical analysis of this influence in their everyday lives.
My ardent and now retrospective love affair with popular mass media goes back to the late-80s, and really gained fruition when I started buying my first cassettes. Kylie Minogue, Jason Donovan, INXS and Public Enemy is where it all began. For this suburban Australian middle-class primary school student, the vortex of allure had most definitely started whirling. Back in those days, I would spend all of my pocket money decking out my bedroom in the merchandise of TV shows such as Young Talent Time, and at as young as 11 years old I was subscribing to Smash Hits magazine—covering my body in the silvery glamour of all the products to grace its glossy pages. I would read about movie stars like Corey Haim or Winona Ryder, who lived in luxurious LA properties, who enjoyed motor cars and sex and partying, and who ‘lived the life’ of the young and nubile Hollywood glitterati. In those days, anything and everything was the go and I was more than happy to be moulded and initiated into TV and magazine ‘cool’. In addition, my savvy pop-culture wisdom gave me currency at school. I would always know the latest movies and fashion trends and as a result there were a significant few years of primary school when I really was the one of the coolest kids in my class. Of course, at the time, this was an utterly significant advantage. Being ‘cool’ meant being accepted, and being accepted meant that your ride on the social roller coaster would inevitably experience fewer bumps and collisions.

Despite this, however, it wasn’t until the oasis of primary school was permanently parched and the seas of an unrelenting high school violently rose that music and image really started to gain primacy in terms of framing my own subjectivity. First year high school brought with it an entirely new world of exclusion and hegemony; one in which I yearned for acceptance, yet in retrospect fervently lacked a sense of coherence and reason. A new social order existed, in which it seemed one had to ‘become’ someone in order to avoid entire social isolation. Was I part of the surf gang? The basketball gang?
The hip-hop gang? Etc. Subcultures lay before me from which to choose a path, and no other alternative was available. In fact, I didn’t want another alternative—I just wanted to fit in, and there were already too many options. It was dangerous to deviate, so the scramble to associate with a group was inevitable and rushed.

After two years of inane attempts to formulate a sense of self in light of basketball courts, surfboards, techno tapes and baggy jeans, I eventually found solace in the one group that seemed to reject them all—the punk kids who sat under the stairs near the school canteen. It’s funny, because at the time it was impossible for me to guess that this group in which I would find solace and meaning was indeed a rich breeding ground for the types of exclusionary ideologies that I would later come to despise and combat.

Blue hair and Doc Martens as a 15-year-old represented the rebellion for which I so adamantly yearned, and I now realize that there was no way I could have risen above my need to do punk rock and in turn render myself a complex bricolage of symbols and images. The pop-culture of punk rock gave me the fix I needed. Yet as I fell further towards ‘fucking the system’ and ‘bringing down the repressive regimes’, adults and teachers around me worked to disenfranchise my new beliefs, put it all down to teenage rebellion, and warn with a stern finger that I would have to grow up one day or suffer the looming consequences. On one hand, I was being sold—through music and popular culture—more and more reasons to want to throw it all away, play in a garage band, and sell my life to nihilism and self-destruction. But on the other hand, for 8 hrs of every school day and almost all extra-curricular social interaction with adults, I was merely talked at, as ‘they’ attempted to imbue me with the sense that I was somehow inherently wrong for wanting to be different, or homosexual because I wanted to dye my hair, or perverse because I listened to music that glorified back alleys, San Francisco punk gangsters and heroin addiction.
Maybe it was a sign of things to come? I distinctly remember being ejected from my year 10 English class after violently arguing with my English teacher. I was screaming from the inanity of learning W.B Yeats—*stupid Irish poet guy doesn’t know anything about the world anyway*—and my teacher was screaming at my insolence and lack of cultural and literary respect. I remember this moment in particular because I now view it as somewhat of a turning point, or more bluntly as the beginning of my downward behaviour spiral. Year 10 became a battleground: the teachers as the enemies and my new found ‘anarchist’ beliefs as my artillery. Most literally, through popular culture and music predominately, my angst and abhorrence for the everyday were given validation and clarity, contrasting with my school and adult worlds in which my beliefs—however naive at the time—were habitually babied and ridiculed. Obviously then, the former influence wielded more primacy and life became all the more about rebellion, anarchy and ‘self-loathing’.

But what did it all mean? Repressive regime? System? I’m sure I didn’t know at the time, yet whatever it was the whole subcultural flurry of punk rock temptation certainly struck a chord within, bonded with my life and impacted in many significant ways upon all aspects of my life. Not that I realized this at the time, for back then my newly adopted interests wholeheartedly represented *me.* They felt like a natural and inevitable process in the evolution of self. Hence, my bedroom walls became cluttered with punk rock posters, I started to graffiti the anarchy symbol on any and every available surface, and once I even remember covering the walls in the school toilets with Sex Pistols and Rancid lyrics. Punk gave me a framework through which I could conceptualize the world and make sense of my life. In punk rock I found temporary solace and protection from a world that was filled with other things I did not understand and no one was willing to teach me: girls, sex, masculinity, drugs, teachers and ultimately the meaning of school, life and work. Soon, I was quite happy to be typecast as a member of a subculture, and in fact, I did my best to support this typecasting. I *was* punk and that’s what I would always be! It was my heart and my soul—the reason
I was put on this earth! But then late in 1994, an Essex band called Blur released an album called Parklife, followed shortly by two media-savvy brothers from Manchester, the Gallagher’s, who had started a band called Oasis and released an album called Definitely Maybe. Those two records to this day have changed my life more than any other, as with their release came the media, fashion and music wave of mid-90s Brit-pop, a subcultural force so appealing to me that I was to forget all about punk rock and ride out my last two years of high school in the English clouds—revolutionizing myself into a whole new me.

The narrative of my school life throughout involved the enamouring of popular culture iconography, utilized as an inspirational crutch through which to locate the essence of authentically felt experiences. Concurrently, the school system silenced these important experiences, leaving me with an acute sense of social isolation and wholly dislocated from the ideologies of a ‘parent generation’ of educators whom for the most part may as well have been speaking a completely different language for my entire 12 years of schooling.

At the time, school’s hateful incongruence with my life seemed innate and unavoidable—a curse to be endured. During my final year of high school I got on well with my teachers in a most disinterested fashion, as I had stopped looking to them for any real answers; I just used them to get the grades I needed to get out of there! I often look back on those days with a sense of sadness because despite the fact that I graduated with excellent academic results, I really was blinded to myself in many ways and demobilized of even the most remote critical faculty. Ten years on, I realize—as an educator and researcher—the many ways that critically empowering learning experiences could have benefited my own life, and my work is now increasingly defined by a desire to ensure that the schooling of future generations does not mirror my own.
Chapter 1 - Establishing links: Subjectivity, Popular Culture and Corporate Ideology.

Part One - Theorizing the formation of subjectivity

This focus on the self as the centre both of lived experience and of discernible meaning has become one of the—if not the—defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures. (Mansfield, 2000: 1)

Epistemologically, constructivist and Foucauldian notions of subjectivity heavily inform the theorization and analysis within this dissertation. In this view, subjectivity is considered a construct, produced within multiple discursive fields; and ‘the subject’ is considered an impermanent site of contextually specific social, historical, political and cultural ideologies and discourses. This perspective I have assumed deviates considerably from the kinds of explanations offered by many Essentialist and Modernist thinkers who believed in the existence of an innate nature or truth regarding the existence of ‘the individual’, and one of the key implications of this is that I believe subjectivities are inherently malleable in nature, and therefore have the capacity to be transformed.

Analytically, qualitative student data gained for this research that concerns the influence of popular culture, branding and corporate ideologies on the subjectivities of young people, has been partitioned in relation to three major Foucauldian concepts pertaining to subjectivity: dividing practices, subjectification and normalization. Each concept spawns from Foucault’s eminent modes of ‘objectification of the subject’, and is integral to any Foucauldian analysis of subjectivity. It is worth considering these concepts within the broader framework of Foucauldian theories on subjectivity in order to shed some further light on how these terms are deployed in this research.
Foucault & The Subject

My role . . . is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people—that’s the role of an intellectual. (Foucault, 1988: 10)

During the early 1980s, Foucault’s work began to reflect an explicit intention to examine the ways in which individuals render themselves ‘subject’ in light of their social context. Foucault developed a schema, highlighting three modes of ‘objectification of the subject’: dividing practices, scientific classification and subjection (Rabinow, 1991: 9-11). It is both the first and last of these that herald the most significance for my work and which I will now discuss briefly. In addition, I will also discuss his theory of normalization, and his theories regarding the role that ‘the state’ and institutions play in the formation of subjectivities.

Foucault’s first mode, dividing practices, describes a situation whereby “the subject is objectified by a process of division either within himself or from others” (Foucault, 1972: 208). This involves the individual imbuing upon themselves or certain other individuals various forms of power and social identities that serve an exclusionary purpose. Foucault predominately wrote of these dividing practices in relation to patterns of social confinement throughout history—in particular the treatment of lepers, those labelled to possess madness, and prison cells—that served to divide individuals from the masses who were generally considered moral and law-abiding. Dividing practices theory, however, has developed its relevance in a range of academic disciplines, and is primarily deployed within this dissertation to investigate various forms of exclusionary practice
within young people’s everyday social spaces. Evidence of dividing practices was rife within my student sample, especially when considering youth subcultures and the various complex social politics pertaining to issues such as acceptable body image, ‘valid’ ideologies, popular culture tastes and fashion. Data suggested that in order to become accepted into—or to maintain one’s position in—many subcultures or peer groups, students were required to adhere to very rigid guidelines of practice in order to avoid exclusion. I discuss this further in subsequent chapters.

Foucault’s third mode, subjectification, is related intrinsically to dividing practices in that its result is another form of exclusionary social practice; yet it is important to note that the concepts differ in significant ways. Foucault argued that dividing practices can be appropriated unwillingly by a range of individuals, whereas subjectification is an active process at the level of the individual, whereby a person chooses to render themselves a subject in their own quest for self-formation. Foucault wrote of ‘operations’ on individuals’ bodies, souls, thoughts and conduct, in alliance with an external authority. Foucault was particularly interested in scientific discourse surrounding sex and sexuality as a method of self-awareness that became popular thought during the nineteenth century. His three-volume History of Sexuality closely examined the wide-ranging ethics on sex that existed throughout different periods of history, and “the discourses on sex which are used to manage populations” (Danaher, et al., 2000: 133). The presence of an external authority—such as a widely influential group, institution, government, or set of discourses—is central to subjectification theory. Foucault argued that when individuals subjectify themselves in relation to such an external authority, they assume, at least in part, the values and moral conditions of the determining force, and identify with a sense of belonging to the authority. Within this dissertation, I position the popular media as an external authority of this nature, and analyze the implications of young people’s subjectification in relation to its various discourses. However, in doing so, I realize that although I have chosen the popular media as an example of an external authority through which to
investigate notions of subjectification, I do so fully aware that in reality young people concurrently subjectify themselves in relation to an immense range of social, cultural, political and economic authorities within their broader institutionalized Western contexts—each with varying effects on their subjectivities. For example, one could easily relate subjectification theory to ‘the school institution’ and the ways that teachers and students subjectify themselves in relation—or resistance—to its multifarious discourses.

In addition to dividing practices and subjectification, an analysis of Foucauldian theories on subjectivity must also consider his work on ‘the state’ and his beliefs that political and economic forces essentially ignore individuals, preferring to look at the interest of the totality, or more specifically, the interests of a particular ruling class or group within society (Rabinow, 1991: 14). The important point here is that whilst Foucault argues that the state ignores particular individuals, the actual root of his argument is that the state is an ‘individualizing force’ that positions individuals in certain ways and through certain ideologies, and therefore produces certain types of subjects. Foucault argues that ‘subjects’ only come into existence through the complex interplay between power and language, and that language is therefore utilized by states in the form of constructing various ideologies to their cause (Mansfield, 2000: 58-60). Foucault argued that “pre-modern modes of power, which relied on religious obedience and vicious force, by the late eighteenth century could no longer cope with the mobile and fractured nature of the human population” (Mansfield, 2000: 58), and as a result: “a new type of power arose, one invested in systems of social administration rather than lodged in individuals and titles—in other words, a power built around institutions (prisons, workhouses, schools, factories, hospitals, barracks), rather than around kings and aristocrats” (Mansfield, 2000: 58). This theory, I feel, is intrinsically linked to the theories of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Althusser’s Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (1971) introduced the idea of the ‘interpellated subject’: one who has been interpelated or ideologically
inscribed by society to assume a particular kind of subjectivity; in this case being one who functioned effectively within a capitalist regime. Althusser concluded the key sites of this interpellation were "the institutions that reproduce the values, meaning and logic of the capitalist system—what are called Ideological State Apparatuses, like the church, family, and especially the school (more recent commentators would, of course, add the mass media)" (Mansfield, 2000: 53). This latter and crucial point of Mansfield’s that the mass media may now be considered a likeness to these apparatus—as an institution reproducing values in congruence with a capitalist model of politics—is most significant to this dissertation. Within my data analysis chapter I position the media in a similar way and attempt to raise some questions regarding ways that the predominately American-owned globalized media is positioning young people in Western cultures to adopt subject positions in congruence to neoliberal capitalist ideologies. Due to the fact that almost all media that young people consume is the product of capitalist economic structures and therefore relies on economic gain to survive, I am interested in the ways that the corporate ideologies ubiquitous within popular texts inform the subjectivities of young people. It is important to note, however, that whilst I draw upon many Foucauldian theories—and to a lesser extent Althusser’s theories—in my analysis, I do not herald the belief that young people are helplessly formed subjects of capitalism. I later discuss and problematize this concept in more detail.

Finally, it is necessary to discuss Foucault’s work on subjectivity in terms of normalization and exclusion—two terms that feature heavily within my data analysis—as they aptly describe the types of processes I observed in the everyday lives of my participants, and more generally in schools and youth subcultures. In Technologies of the Self, Foucault argues that one cannot be a subject without seeing oneself as an object, and Rabinow (1991) clarifies this when he writes that for Foucault there were two meanings to the word subject: “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his (sic) own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings
suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (Rabinow, 1991: 21). As such, Foucault argues that the subject is engaged in a constant process of self-surveillance—positioning exclusion and normalization as concomitant products. Foucault’s most famous explanation on self-surveillance theory arose from his elaborations on the analogy of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is borrowed from British social reformist and utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, and refers to Bentham’s design of the ‘model prison’, a circular structure in which:

... tiers of cells open onto a central courtyard, in the middle of which is a guard tower. With the cells open at the front, a single guard placed in the tower is able to look into dozens of cells more or less simultaneously. Prisoners will never know if they are being observed or not... Since they may be under observation all the time or never, the prisoner becomes responsible for appearing to behave acceptably. (Mansfield, 2000: 61)

The Panopticon serves beautifully as an analogy of the ways a subject will engage in active self-surveillance and modify their own behaviour in order to suit what is held to be acceptable by the dominant gaze. Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli (2005) elaborate on this notion of the Panopticon, writing that one of the effects of constantly being watched is that prisoners begin to watch themselves (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005: 30-31). They cite Lesko (2000) who describes how the guard’s gaze becomes internalized in each prisoner, who therefore takes on the responsibility to self-supervise: “The panoptical gaze is the self-surveillance of those who have been conditioned to being watched, evaluated, and measured. The panoptical gaze produces control through normalization” (Lesko, 2000; cited in Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005: 30-31). In other words, the self modifies and disciplines its own behaviour, constantly re-evaluating its place in the world. As a result, “the self constantly problematised its place in the world and its relationship to others
and to inherited codes of behaviour . . . the subject would not simply rely on some unknowable notion of pure natural selfhood, but would produce itself endlessly as a response to its cultural and historical context” (Mansfield, 2000: 63). Rabinow (1991) writes of the ways that the technologies of normalization play a key role in the “systematic creation, classification, and control of ‘anomalies’ in the social body” (Rabinow, 1991: 21), adding that: “In both cases, the technologies of normalization are purportedly impartial techniques for dealing with dangerous social deviations” (Rabinow, 1991: 21). Gore (1995) furthers this point:

Foucault (1977) highlighted the importance of ‘normalising judgement’ or normalisation in the functioning of modern disciplinary power. He explained that such normalising judgement often occurs through comparison, such that individual actions are referred to “a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation, and the principle of a rule to be followed” (p. 182). (Gore 1995: 171)

Gore (1995) also suggests to the reader that norms should be considered as different from rules, and that unlike specific rules, norms seep into our everyday practices, “subtly delimiting appropriate behaviour” (Gore, 1995: 172), requiring individuals—or students and teachers in the case of Gore’s education-based research—to take responsibility for themselves. Exclusion is therefore intrinsically linked to normalization because as a technique it serves the purpose of “tracing the limits that will define difference, defining boundaries, setting zones . . . ” (Gore 1995: 173). In light of this, it is my belief that exclusion should be viewed as both a product and producer of the normalizing gaze. Within my data analysis I attempt to investigate the ways that the corporate ideologies latent within popular culture texts can serve exclusionary purposes and normalize the subjectivities of consumers. In fact, evidence was rife within my student sample of situations in which young people would
appear to normalize their behaviour or exclude others in light of the influence of the dominant gaze of popular culture’s various ideologies. Common examples included the marginalization of certain individuals due to their ideological or religious beliefs, rampant exclusionary practice within social groups and subcultures, homophobia, and highly limiting versions of acceptable body image. Data of this nature serves to support my argument that the corporate-driven ideologies of popular culture may be having a direct and often negative impact on the everyday lives of young people.

Part Two - Establishing a relationship between corporate ideologies, popular culture and subjectivity

It is necessary at this juncture to establish a relationship between Foucauldian theories on subjectivity and the corporate ideologies that have proliferated within popular culture texts during the last two decades. In doing so, I will clarify my theoretical position regarding the many ways I believe the language and discourses of corporate-driven popular culture texts inform the subjectivities of young people. Initially, however, it is essential to briefly canvas the historical emergence of ‘branding’ in Western culture, in order to illuminate the extent to which popular culture, corporate ideologies and branding have developed into inseparable concerns.

Branding - a brief history

...brand essence as it is often called—gradually took advertising agencies away from selling individual products and their attributes, and towards a psychological/anthropological examination of what brands mean to culture and people’s lives. Branding is the selling of a way of life. (Klein, 2000: 7)
In the mid-1980s, an important change took place in the advertising world, when companies realized that it was more plausible for sustainable profit and company longevity to shift the focus of promotional campaigns from the actual product, to the ‘brand’ of the product (See Klein, 2000: 3-5 and Quart, 2003: 3-10). Klein (2000) writes that this change took place because of the decade’s economic recession that forced major US-based companies to re-evaluate their processes of production. Many companies realized that they “were bloated, oversized; they owned too much, employed too many people and were weighed down by too many things” (Klein, 2000: 4). As a result, a new type of company emerged, such as Nike and Microsoft, who claimed that “producing goods was only an incidental part of their operations, and that thanks to recent victories in trade liberalization and labor-law reform, they were able to have their products made for them by contractors, many of them overseas. What these companies produced primarily were not things, but images of their brands” (Klein, 2000: 4). As a result, the ‘super-brand’ revolution began, and mega-corporations such as Coca-Cola, Nickelodeon, McDonalds and MTV raced-forth in the quest to define and/or refine the overarching ideologies that would serve to delineate the essence of their brands. As Schor (2004) writes, they turned brands: “into ‘signs’, pure symbolic entities, detached from specific products and functional characteristics” (Schor, 2004: 26). Branding, therefore, emerged as a psychological endeavour to an extent previously unimaginable, in which the most successful companies were those who could most effectively manipulate the various desires of their consumers, and in effect, create entire lifestyles in which their products were located as indispensable features. In order to do this, companies had to infiltrate consumers’ inner psyches, forging new ideological truths and realities. In other words, language itself had to be redefined.

Companies literally began flooding popular mass media texts with their ‘branded notions of truth’ in order to most effectively mobilize a culture of consumers to their various causes. Evidence of this is rife when one reflects upon the intensification—and in some cases, the invention—of various
marketing strategies during the 1980s and early-1990s. Common strategies included: heavy product placement in television and films, the importance of establishing a defining logo and slogan, the creation of brand-name super-stores, the ruthless corporate sponsorship of popular events and sports, super-star and celebrity endorsements, the increased corporate influence upon schools and universities, thinly-veiled advertorials and cash-for-comment in popular media, and even advertising research underpinned by psychology theory. All of these strategies served to create new ideological truths about the world, fuelled solely by the pursuits of corporate profiteering. Furthermore, despite the fact that advertising budgets were offset by reductions in the cost of production—because cheap labour could be sourced in Asian and Latin-American countries—popular brand name products grew exorbitantly expensive because product worth had become determined by the ideological currency associated with the essence of owning particular brands.

In short, successful corporations literally transformed Western culture into one in which brands provided endless consumer possibilities which not only affected individuals’ consumption habits, but also inadvertently informed the ideological fabric of their every waking moment. I can illustrate this point by briefly referring to an experience from my own youth. When I was twelve years old in 1991, the Nike Air Jordan sneaker range dominated shoe markets in Australia, assisted by the heavily corporate-sponsored NBA (National Basketball Association) that was receiving worldwide consumer interest at the time. Concomitantly, the brand-essence of companies such as Nike relied greatly on notions of Black-American ‘ghetto-cool’ that burgeoned within popular culture texts as a result. As a final year primary school student, it was simply imperative that I should own a pair of Nike Air Jordan sneakers, as they had become an important commodity in terms of social status and coolness. I distinctly remember arguing with my mother about the expense of the $160AU shoes. She could not understand why the shoes were any different to a pair of ‘imitation Jordan’s’ available from Kmart for around $30AU. She was highly offended by the price, and pointed out that both
shoes were made in Cambodia, and that both looked exactly the same. Well, she was wrong, about the look at least. One pair had the Nike logo and *was* Air Jordan, and the other was simply fraudulent. I feel that this example serves to demonstrate the ways that Nike—in association with the multifarious corporate ideologies associated with the NBA, early-1990s Black-American culture, rap-culture, etc—had created an entire ‘way of being’ that I wanted a part of. In my mind, it was cool to be Black, to play basketball, to have Air Jordan’s, to buy NBA merchandise, and to use American gangsta slang at school. Therefore, corporate ideologies transmitted via popular culture texts, had effectively informed my subjectivity and everyday life to quite a significant extent.

In 2006 we live in a world in which our experiences with popular culture are inadvertently informed by the branded ideologies that accompany these texts and saturate our lives in corporate influence. I challenge the reader to name a popular film, magazine, recording artist, major website, video game or TV show that is not intrinsically defined by the market it is reliant upon for transmission. Corporate efforts to create branded ideologies and lifestyles seem to have paid off, and companies continue, “to work overtime to establish brand identity and loyalty” (Schor, 2004: 26). Schor (2004) argues that young people have been especially affected, and that corporate attempts to brand young people have defined “a winning strategy, and youth have eagerly embraced an ethic of labels and logos . . . the process of extensive branding has become a profoundly normalized part of our children’s lives. It’s now a lack of branding that’s out of the ordinary. (Schor, 2004: 26)

Branded subjectivities

If, in line with Foucauldian theories, subjectivities are constructed within multiple discursive fields and are the result of the complex interplay between language and power, then it would seem apt to
suggest that the language and discourses of popular culture texts significantly inform the
subjectivities of youth. Furthermore, if the popular culture texts that young people consume are
indeed so heavily informed by corporate ideologies and branding, then an obvious implication is that
young people’s subjectivities are being heavily informed by corporate ideologies. This seems even
more plausible when one considers that popular culture texts rely almost solely upon corporate
funding in order to survive, and that a wealth of data—including my own—suggests young people
consume popular culture texts more than any other text forms. I have adopted the theoretical
perspective that popular culture texts, branding, and corporate ideologies are intrinsically linked and
inseparable. Hence, when young people consume popular culture, they consume brands. Therefore,
I believe the important question is not whether the subjectivities of young people are inherently
branded, but rather: to what extent are they branded?

It is this question that forms the core of the second phase of my data analysis, and I use the
aforementioned Foucauldian theories of subjectivity as an analytical framework to explore the
‘extent’ to which my participants’ subjectivities have been influenced by corporate ideologies and
branding. As I later will discuss, this analysis pays particular attention to investigating the various
discourses and subject positions made available to young people through popular culture. It is also
unashamedly political in its intent, fuelled by my personal concern that young people may never
know what it is like to live in a world that is not defined by the inadequacies born of invasive
advertising. I posit language as both our prison and our potential saviour—capable of being turned
upon itself in order to combat the very ideologies that it has been utilized to create. My hope is that
through critical pedagogical practice, furthered knowledge and empowering deconstructive analysis,
at least some freedom can be forged—opening up spaces for realization in the minds of young
people and helping to forge a more subversive future generation of youth.
Indeed one study found that adolescents were engaged with media for 110 percent of their day—a statistic that makes more sense once it is understood that young people are engaged with several forms at once—perhaps listening to the radio while playing a computer game, or glancing at the TV in another corner of the room. (Bates, 1994: 225; cited in Beavis, 1997: 235)

A wealth of empirical research and literature suggests that young Western teenagers are saturated in popular media and regularly positioned as objects of capitalist gain and branded ideologies (Giroux, 1998a/1998b; Barrell and Hamment, 1999; Klein, 2000; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004). Research suggests that this saturation is a result of both active consumption by young individuals, and rampant unavoidable exposure to heavily commodified and profit-driven texts. Trends also suggest that popular culture material is more frequently available to young people than ever before, and that young people's levels of popular culture consumption eclipse those of previous generations (Bates, 1994; Beavis 1997; Lafayette, 2003; Reynolds, 2003). In addition, the popular culture diets of young people are more varied than ever, regularly including texts such as websites, netzines, E-cards, DVDs, downloadable animations and multimedia, popular music, online messenger services, video-clips, glossy magazines, web-blogs, television, text messaging, and more. Many of these newer forms actively absorb young people in the ongoing production of their own popular culture concurrent to their consumption of it, and serve as significant meaning-making tools that are situated in the public domain.
The nature of research regarding young people’s popular culture consumption habits has also shifted significantly over the last few decades. For example, many studies in the 80s and 90s seemed intent on proving that the consumption of popular culture in Western countries had surpassed that of traditional forms of culture, and was therefore dominant in its influence over youth and the general populace (See Beavis 1997). In contrast, more recent research (Strelitz, 2002; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004) seems to simply assume that popular culture is the dominant textual influence for young people. A major implication of this shift is that the prevalence of popular culture in young people’s lives seems to have been initiated as a ‘common truth’ within academic discourse, and that more recent research regarding popular culture consumption has emerged following new trends and argument threads—such as research that investigates the ways that young people negotiate popular cultural consumption or the context in which consumption takes place (See Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; Greenfield, 2002; Schor, 2004; Quart, 2004).

Having reviewed recent empirical research and data regarding young people’s consumption of popular culture texts, three trends have emerged of particular significance to my research: firstly, young popular culture consumers are ‘multi-taskers’; secondly, their popular culture consumption exposes them to far more branding and corporate influence than any generation thus far; and thirdly, their consumption of interactive, online and video game texts is growing rapidly.

It is important to note that whilst some of the following data has been sourced from research undertaken in the education paradigm, a majority has not. This is simply because consumption data seems to be rarely produced in the field of educational research. As a result, I have sourced a great deal of data from a variety of other academic fields, such as cultural studies, sociology, advertising, and even corporate-based market research.
Possibly more than any other trend to feature in recent research is the extent to which young people ‘multi-task’ when it comes to their consumption of popular texts. Conceptually, multi-tasking suggests that young people are often involved in the consumption of multiple popular culture texts at the same time. For example, a young person may surf the net whilst having an MSN Instant-Messenger conversation, whilst also listening to music and having the television on in the background. In fact, I believe that this multi-tasking nature of current youth media consumption is one of the key trends to set this generation apart from its predecessors. Multi-tasking, for obvious reasons, results in media saturating young people to an extent previously unimaginable, giving credence to Bates’ assertion that young people are involved with media for 110 percent of their days (Bates, 1994: 225 cited in Beavis, 1997: 235). Several North American and UK studies have also noted this trend of saturation as a result of multi-tasking consumption habits (Bates, 1994; Lafayette, 2003; Reynolds, 2003).

A 2003 study by the US-based consumer information company Knowledge Networks (cited in Lafayette, 2003), interviewed 245 randomly selected consumers between the ages of 8-17 about their use of media technology, positioning the television as their prime area of investigation. The study found that 72 percent of those interviewed would multitask when watching television, involving themselves in more than one form of popular media at the same time (Lafayette, 2003: ¶ 2). The study also found that young people would read magazines, play handset video games or use the Internet at the same time as watching television. Many participants had a computer and a television in their room, and of these participants, 85 percent would use the Internet at the same time as watching television (Lafayette, 2003: ¶ 2). In addition, the study found that 1 in 3 survey participants had either cable modem access, a VCR or a video game console in their rooms. Those who had a television in their room reported watching an average of 2.9 hours of television
each day, and 43 percent of this sample would regularly visit websites advertised on television (Lafayette, 2003: ¶ 11). This latter figure highlights the ways that the marketing world is adapting to a multi-tasking generation by producing cross-medium campaigns. Generally, the Knowledge Networks study serves to highlight the extent to which a broad range of media technologies are now prevalent in the immediate living spaces of young people.

Reynolds (2003) cites a North American study of the same year called Children’s Media Odysseys, that shows 13-17 year-olds display a high levels of multi-tasking. When watching television, 67 percent of respondents said they would surf the Internet, 56 percent said they would send text messages, 34 percent said they would listen to the radio, and 66 percent said they would read magazines (Reynolds, 2003: ¶ 5-6). This data was sourced from 400 respondents to an online response survey, conducted by the market research company MindShare Strategies.

The trend of multi-tasking is of particular interest to my research as it highlights the types of experiences and levels of involvement that young people in Western culture have with popular culture, and it supports my argument that corporate-driven popular culture texts saturate the experiences of young people to a large degree. Ultimately, this saturation implies there is a greater chance than ever that young people will be positioned to appropriate the branded subject positions of popular culture texts. Schor (2004) canvasses this idea of saturation born of multi-tasking, using both her own data and that of other recent surveys to argue this point. One survey she references that is of particular interest is a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, titled Kids & Media @ the Millennium—a large-scale survey that combined a time-diary with questions about young people’s media viewing habits. Compiled in a US-context, these figures show that participants aged 8-13 were on average exposed to about 8 hours and 8 minutes of media each day (Schor, 2004: 154). When considering the time an average young person is likely
to be awake each day, and given that around 8 hours of school is an everyday reality for many Western children, such figures indicate a significant percentage of this ‘awake time’ is likely to be involved with the negotiation of popular media texts. The Kaiser study also found that whilst there was a shift towards the Internet as a major source of media involvement, television still reigned supreme as the number one source of exposure. The study found that 8-13 year-olds watched an average 3 hours and 37 minutes of television each day (Schor, 2004: 158), and that as a result, it was the text form around which a majority of multi-tasking consumption occurred.

The rising consumption of branded ideologies

There is undoubtedly an assumption in academic literature and theory that young people are consuming more branded ideologies than ever before, and whilst this assumption seems logical and is most likely correct, there is unfortunately a lack of supporting empirical data available. In fact, although a plethora of literature exists that critiques the impact of corporate ideologies and branding on the lives of young people, such texts rarely provide data that can clarify the extent to which young people are actually consuming brands. One obvious reason for this is that whilst it is reasonably easy to ascertain the extent to which young people consume popular culture’s various text forms, it is very difficult to determine the extent to which the branded ideologies and messages within these texts are consumed. I considered this problem before conducting my data collection, and decided that because I had developed a theoretical position that assumed an intrinsic and inseparable relationship between corporate ideologies and popular culture, I would simply rely upon the popular culture consumption data to help illuminate the extent to which young people consumed branded ideologies. For better or worse, this assumption informing my research appears to be one shared by a majority of writers in the field. Despite this, however,
Schor (2004) and Clack (2004) do offer some relevant data for consideration, and both suggest that young people consume branded ideologies to an extremely large extent.

Schor’s (2004) research provides worthwhile data in terms of current estimates concerning the consumption of branded texts, and is also of broader interest when considering the influence of branding and ‘corporate presence’ in the lives of young people. Schor’s main data collection strategy for quantifying consumption patterns was a survey titled The Survey on Children, Media and Consumer Culture, and was answered by over 300 children between the ages of ten and thirteen. Schor’s data suggests that children, from a very young age, become saturated in brand name influence and perpetuate clear beliefs that brand names communicate their own distinct personalities. Schor found that by the age of first grade, her average study participant could evoke over 200 brands when asked (Schor, 2004: 19). Schor’s teenager is one who views over 40,000 commercials annually and watches over three-and-a-half hours of television a day (Schor, 2004: 20). Schor’s research suggests that these teenagers are saturated in types of corporate popular culture ideologies that enamour violence, substance abuse and gratuitous sexuality, “based on unrealistic body images, constraining gender stereotypes, and, all too frequently, the degradation of women” (Schor, 2004: 20). She adds: “The dominant teen culture is also rife with materialism, and preaches that if you’re not rich, you’re a loser. Adolescents are subjected to unremitting pressure to conform to the market’s definition of cool” (Schor, 2004: 20). Schor suggests that today’s youth are the most brand-orientated generation in history thus far, noting:

... the sheer extent of children’s immersion in consumer culture today is unprecedented ... marketed leisure has replaced unstructured socializing, and most of what kids do revolves around commodities. (Schor, 2004: 15)
Schor’s research evokes endless provocative figures to this effect, supporting my previous statement that the typical young person is frequently immersed in a world of branded popular culture. Schor’s data has direct implications for my own research, as her findings argue a similar polemic to mine regarding the negative implications born of brand saturation. There are however, some limitations to Schor’s work, which I will later discuss in more detail.

In addition to Schor’s work, some limited data is available on recent brand name consumption trends, although it is unsurprisingly located in the market research and advertising research paradigms. Obviously, data is gathered in these fields in order to inform agencies and corporations as to how they can better develop brand identities, further sell and develop ‘brand essence’, and market various ideologies and products to young people. Such research has proven invaluable to this dissertation, as it informs my own knowledge in terms of the corporate perspective and adds weight to my arguments regarding consumption trends.

It would seem that teenagers and Tweens (pre-teens) are the talk of the advertising world at present, and their highly disposable and growing incomes render them of supreme interest to brand-makers. In 2002, a study by the market research company NPD Group found that the Tween market alone was worth 12 billion dollars per annum to the US economy (Clack, 2004: ¶ 1), and that young people both consumed and responded to branded messages to a large degree. The survey found that whilst clothing still topped the buying charts for teens and pre-teens, this was being supplanted at a rapid rate by the electronics market. In other words, young people are becoming electronically mobile and ‘empowered’, and are therefore subject more than ever to the various branding campaigns promoted through electronic text forms. Furthermore, the make-up and accessories market was booming for young girls, whose aim—according to the study—is to emulate the adult world by which they are surrounded (Clack, 2004: ¶ 6). The survey found that
parents would spend on average of $220 per month on their Tween children, and whilst the teen market was similar, their spending budget was supplemented by casual jobs (Clack, 2004: ¶ 11). Clack (2004) features an interview with Marshal Cohen, NPD Group chief industry analyst, who says that brands remain critically important to tweens and teens as they use brands as indicators of fashion acceptance. Cohen says: "Most tweens don't have a lot of fashion sense, but they do have tremendous brand sense" (Clack, 2004: ¶ 14).

In surveys of this nature, I have noticed the way that teenagers and children are considered 'walking dollars signs', and such research highlights the troubling ways that corporate bodies position young people as targets of their predatory gaze. This is one of the main reasons I later argue a critical approach to branded texts is needed in the classroom—to offer combat to this rapacious force. Such literature details the importance for advertisers to create brands that will work to exploit the consumer potential of youth; and is both transparent in its purpose to do so and blind to questioning the implications of adopting such an entirely consumeristic interest.

The growing influence of video games and the Internet

Recent research suggests that traditionally accepted forms of popular culture, such as magazines and non-interactive forms of media such as TV might now be declining in popularity; giving way to interactive, online, and globally accessible texts. Given the obvious growing technological mobility of young people in Western contexts, it would seem fitting to suggest that young people’s interest and involvement in interactive media such video games and online texts is on the increase. Recent research regarding youth consumption of video games and online material supports this claim (Kelly, 1998; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; Rosen and Weil, 2001; Quart,
A common argument shared by this research is that the extent to which young people are involved with these forms has risen sharply during the last 10 years in particular, and that these forms of popular culture represent a significant portion of an average young person’s daily intake. For example, Quart writes of how young people are “more likely to learn their fashion cues from a game than from Television” (Quart, 2003: 130), adding:

Television watching has diminished among teens over the last decade. A recent survey of 12,000 adolescents found that teens spend 12.2 hours per week online and only 7.6 hours per week watching TV. (Quart, 2003: 130)

While this is incongruent with the television consumption data of Schor (2004), it is in line with the data of Rosen and Weil (2001), who found that pre-teens played video games for an average of three hours a day. My data suggests that in many cases, Internet and video game consumption has eclipsed that of traditionally accepted popular texts like magazines and television. I also found that the Internet is rivalled by video games when considering the consumption patterns of the male members of the survey sample group. These findings are in line with my hypothesis that the popular culture consumption patterns of young people are rapidly changing, and that consumption is moving further away from traditional popular culture forms.

One problem, however, is that most of the empirical data I have sourced has been predominately produced in North American and UK contexts, which creates limits when I attempt to argue the relevance of such data within my Australian research context. In fact, regarding video games in particular, it seems very few studies at all have been located in an Australian context, with the rare exceptions of Durkin and Aisbett (1999)—which is now somewhat dated—and Clayton (2003). Clayton (2003) used both quantitative and qualitative methods to survey the use of video games.
such as *Nintendo* and *PlayStation* with a group of six-to-eight-year-olds, finding, for example, that boys of this age would average around 25 minutes use of these games each day. Clayton’s data is interesting to consider, however it does little to assist with my own research concerning teenage consumption patterns. I feel my study offers new and illuminating data by surveying the video game and Internet consumption patterns of young people in an Australian setting. This data may serve to offer Australian researchers a more clear indication of the types of texts consumed in this nation, in preference to relying upon North American and UK data.

**Part Two - The influence of popular culture texts, branding and corporate ideologies on the subjectivities of young people**

Historically, some of the earliest research involving young people, popular culture and subjectivity was that conducted by The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, formed at Birmingham University in 1964. Academics of this ‘Birmingham School’ of thought “profoundly shaped the interests and methods of subcultural analysis for the next two decades” (Gelder, 1997; in Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 83). Issues of popular culture and its appropriation in subcultural groupings is an important aspect of my data analysis, hence the work of the CCCS is of particular interest. The CCCS researchers studied the relations between ideologies and form, paying particular attention to what became known as the “spectacular forms” adopted by youth subcultures such as the Mods, Teds, Skinheads and Punks. Broadly, it could be written that the aim of the CCCS was primarily to, “locate them in relation to three broader cultural structures: the working class or ‘parent culture’, the ‘dominant culture’, and ‘mass culture’” (Gelder, 1997; in Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 83). Even now, the Birmingham School research remains one of the most significantly referenced periods of popular culture and subculture study, and it is common
to find current texts citing the work of influential researchers of the time such as Dick Hebdige, Phil Cohen, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber.

I feel that too much of the CCCS research was obsessed with spectacular subcultures and seemed to assume that all members of a subculture shared basically homogeneous views and reasons for becoming involved with their ‘resisting’ group. In my opinion, the Birmingham School reflected an obsession with class and an absence of ‘girls’ within the subcultural group investigation, with the exception of McRobbie and Garber’s influential work *Girls and Subcultures* (1976). Despite this, however, there are still significant implications of the CCCS’s work in terms of this study; namely the numerous case studies and research that specifically posited young people and their popular culture tastes as subjects of analysis. The CCCS was pioneering in this respect and it is easy to consider the CCCS as the key site at which popular culture research concerning youth all began. The work of the CCCS researchers has contributed in significant ways to my own knowledge of this field. Without it, I doubt my work would exist today in its current form.

Dick Hebdige’s work regarding ‘Punk’ and ‘Mod’ subcultures is of particular interest to this study for several reasons. Hebdige often utilized Foucauldian theories of exclusion in analyzing the workings of subcultures. Significantly, Hebdige spoke of the ways that youths would fashion themselves, using pop-culture icons in order to define themselves through a process of commodity selection, excluding others in the process: “For youths . . . goods could function symbolically as ‘weapons of exclusion’ [Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 85], as boundary markers, as a means of articulating identity and difference” (Hebdige, 1985; cited in Gelder/Thornton, 1997: 401). Hebdige wrote of how young people became saturated in style and the ‘culture of consumption’—a fascinating thread of his research that is related in interesting ways to more recent research on branding and youth subjectivity; and of course, my own dissertation.
Hebdige’s work is extensive. His seminal ‘Subculture: The meaning of style’, first published in 1979, analyzed subcultures using a variety of case studies—many of which investigated London-based subcultural groupings of young people to support his arguments. Hebdige’s work has been significantly influential in terms of my personal reading in preparation for this dissertation.

Generally speaking, however, the work of the CCCS did not consider theories of branding and issues of subjectivity born of corporate ideology, and could not have been expected to do so, as its work was undertaken prior to the significant academic and cultural birthing of such concepts. Many CCCS researchers considered the negotiation with popular culture on the part of young people to be in response to specific historical conditions and as involving an active rebellion against a parent generation that was out of touch with the realities of young people at the time. This may well have been the case, however, my research suggests that 30 years later we find ourselves living in a wholly different textual landscape—in which the globalization of a Western-owned media sees popular culture at its highest frequency thus far, and as an active vehicle for the transmission of branded ideology.

Recent research on youth, branding, popular culture and subjectivity

When considering recent research regarding popular culture, subjectivity and branding, it becomes obvious that the ways young people currently negotiate and appropriate their involvement with popular culture is far different from Hall’s post-war teens or Hebdige’s punks. Central to this dissertation is the notion that the rise of corporate ideological influence on popular culture in the 80s and 90s has had an enormous impact on the nature and effect of texts now commonly consumed by young people, and there is a measure of recent literature to support
this idea (Giroux, 1998b; Klein, 2000; Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004). The currently multi-layered and complex textual worlds of young people seem to be the object of what seems to be a growing area of research, and in most cases, such research suggests a relentless commodity culture has arisen, in which popular brand names have taken on supreme importance in the formation of young people’s subjectivities (Giroux, 1998b; Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Faulkner 2003; Quart 2003; Schor, 2004; Chaplin and John, 2005). The complexity and ferocity of advertising strategies has also expounded; as academic Susan Linn notes in the 2003 documentary *The Corporation* when she quips: “Comparing the marketing of yesteryear to the marketing of today is like comparing a bee-bee gun to a smart bomb”.

However, in general terms, investigations into the effects of *branding* on the subjectivities of young people contribute to a relatively new paradigm of research, and aside from work produced by a handful of pertinent researchers in the field, significant empirical data lacks detail, history and scope. I believe a chasm of sorts exists, and further research is needed to investigate the various ways that corporate ideologies inform individuals’ subjectivities and everyday experiences. One contributing factor to this relatively incomplete and complex picture is that the relationship between corporate ideologies and subjectivity is actually incredibly hard to quantify and analyze. Furthermore, recent empirical research of this kind that has been conducted in an *Australian* context is remarkably rare, with the exception of Kenway, et al. (1997), Humphery (1998), Kenway and Bullen (2001), and a meager spattering of others. I hope my data can serve to expand the breadth of data in this field, both generally and within a localized Australian context.

Another problem is that much of the research that has been compiled in this area has been done so in the field of market research (Chaplin and John, 2005). Publications such as *The Journal of Consumer Marketing, Strategy, Brand Strategy, Journal of Consumer Research*, and the *Journal of Business*
Research sporadically feature research to this effect. Such literature does have its place in this review; yet in analyzing these texts, I feel it is extremely important to recognize the context in which they have been produced. Such contexts are wholly antithetical to my own in their purpose, and whilst they offer interesting ammunition to my own cause, they also conjure personal feelings of abhorrence for me, which can result in subjective responses as a researcher and writer. These subjective urges need to be recognized and controlled. In particular, I feel market research texts can be used effectively when being subverted to argue why more research with emancipatory aims needs to take place in fields closer to that of my own. The use of market research data in an academic context also offers a perspective not often available in academic texts (Kenway and Bullen, 2001: 7). For example, the research informing Lindstrom and Seybold’s (2003) book BRANDchild: remarkable insights into the minds of today’s global kids and their relationships with brands, highlights major ways that young people have incorporated brands into their lives, and conveniently supports my proposition about the ways that young people are subject to the enormous weight of predatory corporate forces.

Current research to which I am momentarily aligned is that laced with a charged emancipatory tone, arguing that young Western individuals are at risk of being entrapped by a rapacious and increasingly powerful corporate media, and that they are enamored of problematic branded ideologies and limiting subject positions (Giroux, 1998b; Klein, 2000; Greenfield, 2002; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004). This is an argument thread continued in this dissertation and is an aspect of research and theory to which I have become reasonably attached. I am also aware that I often possess quite a subjective perspective, which is born of what I have come to understand as the ‘anti-branding movement’, a recent development that has experienced some left-wing commercial interest of late, however, has not really received detailed academic commentary. Leaders of this movement include the aforementioned Naomi Klein, Alissa Quart, Juliet B. Schor and Susan
Linn, who have become synonymous with literature and campaigns that espouse ideologies previously only present in guerrilla fanzines, proactive social commentary websites and relatively low-distribution magazines such as *Adbusters*. Klein’s (2000) call-to-arms *No Logo* was a defining piece of work for this new movement and is now commonly referenced in debates on branding theory. It highlighted a range of issues born of globalization, the growing corporatization of the Western media, brand-born problems such as ‘identity marketing’, youth branding, and included a detailed historical account of the rise of the corporate ‘superbrand’. Quart (2003) furthered Klein’s argument with *Branded: The buying and selling of teenagers*, yet isolated her analysis to the effects of branding on teenagers, concentrating on issues regarding tween branding, the corporatization of schools, teen brand consultants, branding in video games, and body image issues born of immersion in branded worlds.

I will now canvas two argument threads that have emerged through investigating literature of this nature. Firstly, I will briefly survey research that explores the sheer extent to which young people have incorporated branded artifacts into their everyday lives. Secondly, I will review in more detail, research that specifically attempts to investigate the influence and effects of branding and corporate ideology on the subjectivities and everyday lives of young people.

The importance of brand-name artifacts in the lives of young people

Recent research suggests that brand-name items and artifacts of popular culture are prevalent to an enormous extent in the everyday lives of young people (Salinger, 1995; Ji, 2002; Faulkner, 2003; Lafayette, 2003; Quart 2003; Reynolds, 2003; Clack, 2004; Schor, 2004). Researchers such as Kenway and Bullen (2001), Quart (2003) and Schor (2004) offer detailed qualitative evidence
that suggests young people are positioned regularly through the popular culture texts they consume to fashion themselves in congruence to branded trends, and each offers an interesting analysis and theorization of the implications of such positioning. Other researchers have managed to merely illustrate the saturated presence of popular culture products in the lives of young people, and in the case of the social-documentary photography work of Salinger (1995) and Greenfield (2002), this has been done in a thought provoking and confronting way.

Faulkner’s (2003) research is of particular significance as she presents rare evidence of qualitative work implemented in an Australian context. Faulkner provides data born of observations and interviews with students who talk about the importance of popular brand names in their lives. Faulkner refers to the process of choosing ‘what to wear and say’ as the literacies of popular culture and writes about one of her subjects, Hsui, who is the product of a traditional Chinese family, yet fashions herself as a “trendy street-wise Australian teenager” (Faulkner, 2003: 49). In order to do this, Hsui employs fashionable products of popular culture. Faulkner uses Hsui as an example of the ways that young people use popular clothing items to define their subculture status and self-image. Hsui is quoted explaining to a peer that she went through “the biggest homey stage. I had 26 Red homey pants. I am so ashamed” (Faulkner, 2003: 49). When her peer asks what 26-Red pants are, Hsui answers that they are a brand, and then more specifically that they are a ‘homey’ brand. Here, it would seem Hsui is making a direct link between an active subculture that is located within popular culture, and a brand of clothing—a link that her peer can then comfortably comprehend. At several stages during my own semi-structured interviews for this dissertation, my subjects would talk elaborately and very specifically about the types of clothes that quite rigidly defined the subcultures in which either they or their friends were involved. Strict guidelines existed, say, for the “Emo/Hardcore crew”—a subculture that
emerged in my research as one of the most limiting in terms of fashion possibilities and available subject positions; despite being considered by the students an ‘alternative subculture’.

Another piece of work to aptly demonstrate the appropriation of popular culture artifacts into the lives of young people is Salinger’s (1995) book *In My Room: Teenagers in their bedrooms*, the result of a study deploying a mixed methods approach of documentary photography and qualitative interviews. Even though it is now over a decade old, its relevance still burns bright. Salinger’s analysis concentrates on the ways that the private living spaces of teenagers reflect their sense of self and broader beliefs about the worlds they inhabit. In many cases, Salinger documents rooms clad with the icons and ornaments of mid-90s popular culture: gig flyers, band posters, magazines, pin-up girls, pin-up boys, basketball stars, soft porn pictures, brand-name clothes hanging all over the furniture, anarchy symbols graffitied onto American flags, videos, comic books, TV and film merchandise, beauty products, expensive (or otherwise) colognes, and more. The list could go on forever when canvassing the countless popular culture items that Salinger’s teenagers integrate into their own living spaces. In what appears as an attempt to define their personal space and sense of identity, Salinger’s participants offer external manifestations of their own inner senses of self, in some many cases display an obvious and intense involvement with popular culture artifacts. My first reaction to Salinger’s text was imagine each bedroom scenario if every popular culture influence was removed. If such a fictional scenario were to occur, a majority of the rooms would contain no more than a few family photos and paint on brick walls.

The works of Quart (2003), Greenfield (2002) and Schor (2004) also contain similar depictions of young people, representing their subjects as saturated in popular culture items and brand-name products. Quart (2003) includes many qualitative interviews that represent the extreme level of currency placed on such items by her participants.
The influence and effects of branding and corporate ideology on the subjectivities of young people

Recent studies that investigate the ways corporate ideologies, branding and popular culture texts influence teenagers, generally argue that a range of negative consequences abound and that current youth subjectivities are far too branded (Giroux 1998b; Klein, 2000; Greenfield, 2002; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004). Other studies argue that regardless of the nature of the effects, branding and corporate ideology does intrinsically influence the subjectivities of young people, playing an important role in identity formation (Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Ji, 2002; Chaplin and John, 2005). Either way, it would appear that corporate ideological influence on popular culture texts is increasing (Savan, 1994; Korten, 1995; Giroux, 1998b; Klein, 2000; Greenfield, 2002; Quart, 2003); implying that the extent to which young people’s subjectivities are informed by this influence is concurrently on the rise. Personally, I believe that the saturation of Western culture in corporate influence has become so naturalized that many individuals rarely question—or even notice—the role or effect of its presence. As a culture, I feel we are deeply branded.

Evidence exists to suggest that young people make very real connections between products and their own self-identity. Consumption, it seems, “is now recognized as a defining characteristic of the lifestyle of the western world” (Kenway and Bullen, 2001: 8). Kenway and Bullen (2001) argue that consumer-media culture has transformed the lives of children and that “commodities and advertisements have long been used by both producers and consumers to construct the child and to articulate social relationships within families” (Kenway and Bullen, 2001: 33-34). Chaplin and John (2005) recognize that individuals use brands to create and communicate self-concepts, and describe this process as “self-brand connections” (Chaplin and John, 2005: 1). Hemsley (2004) writes of a market research survey by Logistix Kids, which demonstrates the powerful
bonds that preschool-aged children make with brands, and branded characters such as *Bob The Builder* or the pop band *All Saints*. Fournier (1998) garnered rare empirical evidence to suggest that adults developed a range of relationships with brands that transcended their role as merely passive objects or products; rather positing brands as humanized and personalized entities (Fournier, 1998: 334). Ji (2002) furthers this line of enquiry by researching children, and argues that the mass media is a major socialization agent informing young people’s realities and beliefs regarding brands (Ji, 2002: 373). This perspective is supported by Kenway and Bullen (2001).

However, despite these examples, a gap does remain in terms of extensive data to analyze teenagers, who reside at an awkward mid-way between the more commonly analyzed ages of childhood and adulthood. Even Schor’s (2004) extensive work is predominately concerned with children and tweens, and does not offer a wealth of information beyond these ages. Klein (2000) argues fervently for the negative effects brand names can have on teenagers, but does not provide any substantial data as evidence. This abundance of theory and opinion amidst a lack of data is unfortunately a common trend. As a result, researchers such as Quart (2003) and Greenfield (2002) offer rare and worthwhile data to contribute to my knowledge regarding teenagers specifically—despite that fact that their research has been compiled in North America, and does not necessarily enlighten my perspective regarding Australian youth specifically.

Quart (2003) uses in-depth interview data with teenage participants in the US to interrogate the effects that branding and consumer culture have on their everyday experiences. Quart’s work rings with a loud tone of intense cautionary warning and paints the picture of a current teenage generation that is increasingly defined—both externally and internally—by corporate America. Quart’s participants appear remarkably affected by the ideologies of popular culture, and severely limited in terms of the constraints born of the ‘necessity’ to adhere to the various demands that
branding places on their lives. Quart’s qualitative data reflects an amazing sense of self-awareness on the part of her participants, who were quite accepting of the fact that the media was manipulating them in a range of different ways. Many of her female participants said they were been directly influenced by popular culture to change their bodies into more desirable forms. Quart’s participants display a realization of the effects of popular culture, yet this seems to have no effect on their brand-orientated behaviour. In other words, they are still heavily affected by branding and popular culture, despite maintaining some disdain towards them. Greenfield’s (2002) research also offers a similar perspective, and is compiled in her book of the same year, *Girl Culture*. Her anthropological research is seminal in terms of blending the art of photography with the power of qualitative interviews in order to offer various representations of female youth culture in the US. Feminist writer Joan Jacob Brumberg offers an insightful introduction to *Girl Culture*, noting the critical stance that Greenfield takes towards her data. Brumberg writes that Greenfield’s work contains important messages about the relationships between young women and garish commercial culture, adding: “her photographs consistently point to the unhappy symbiosis between the special psychological needs of adolescent girls and the superficial narcissistic content of so much of what young people see in the popular media” (Brumberg, 2002; in Greenfield, 2002: 7). Greenfield’s data is the result of her spending significant time with her participants, during which she gained particular insights into their emotional worlds. As a result, the interviews offer rich data in terms of her participants’ self-images, their involvement with peer groups, and the role that popular culture texts play in their lives. The interviews also provide evidence that her participants are actively involved in detrimental processes of self-surveillance in response to popular media influences regarding fashion, body image and brand names. Brumberg points out the irony in that despite the amount of time American women spend looking at themselves, they are in fact anything but a self-reflective society (Brumberg 2002; in Greenfield, 2002: 8). Greenfield’s data is unerring and evocative, featuring a diverse
sample of girls at a range of locations; and it mirrors many of the themes that also emerged in
interviews I undertook with my own female participants. There are, however, limitations to
Greenfield’s research. As the photographs form the major aspect of the book, the interviews are
often short and lack detail. Furthermore, the interviews are presented as an evocative collection
of piercing snippets that I feel have often been designed to shock and maim the reader into
adopting a particular stance towards young American females. I believe that a broader picture of
interview data would be necessary if the text were to be considered further. Through my own
qualitative semi-structured interviews, I made an active attempt to investigate similar issues as
Greenfield, however, in presenting the data I have tried to present the conflicting and ambiguous
statements, as well as those perfectly suited to support my own argument.

Overall, negative portraits have persisted when canvassing research regarding the influence of
branding on the subjectivities of youth. It is interesting that despite tiring searches, I have failed
to find any empirical research that suggests corporate ideologies have any positive effects on young
people. In fact, most research favors the line that corporate influence may be rendering young
people far worse in psychological terms, and it is a commonly held belief among branding critics
that the subject positions offered by corporate-driven popular culture texts are limiting in their
scope and are detrimental to the health of society. Schor’s (2004) research is extensive and
suggests that an involvement in consumer culture and popular culture “causes dysfunction in the
forms of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychosomatic complaints” (Schor, 2004: 17).
Schor quotes findings from the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General (1999, Table 3-1) that shows
one in five children and adolescents between the ages of 9-17 suffer from a form of mental
illness (Schor, 2004: 36). Schor attempts to prove that corporate-driven popular culture texts are
directly linked to this adverse mental health in young people, and it is obvious that the types of
questions she uses in her surveys have been implicitly directed with this outcome in mind. In
some ways, I feel that Schor’s questions are too directed and subjective, despite the fact that elements of her argument are very convincing. Broadly, Schor paints a picture of an American youth culture concerned with rising poverty, obesity, and drug and substance use and abuse. Quart (2003), in a similar vein to Schor, concludes that her teenage subjects had “dependably fragile self-images”, and comments upon their ongoing “need to belong to groups” (Quart, 2003: xxiv). Rich within Quart’s language is the insinuation that popular culture and branded ideologies were intrinsically influencing her subjects’ psychological health in negative ways. The data of a 2003 survey from BuzzBack Market Research titled Buzzback’s Tweens Exploratory, also suggests that youngsters are increasingly attuned to and emotionally influenced by brand names, and that they consume brand messages at an alarming rate. BuzzBack interviewed a sample of 500 tweens from varying socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds in the US, and found that in terms of “fitting in”—and other important emotional aspects—brands and advertising products were intrinsically connected to their feelings and self-concepts.

It would therefore seem logical as to why several researchers and writers tend to refer to the branding of young people’s subjectivities in terms of both external and internal manifestations (Korten, 1995; Klein, 2000; Ji, 2002; Faulkner, 2003; Quart, 2003; Schor 2004). Klein (2000) argues that we are in effect losing a part of our internal psyche to the brand, referring to this as the corporate “colonization” of our minds, typified by a loss of space that happens inside the individual (Klein, 2000: 66). Quart (2003) supports this idea and argues that this internalization is a side effect of recent developments in psychological branding:

No longer can teens’ interest in brands be reduced to an ordinary concern with differentiation, or to distinguishing one’s identity from that of the group and the converse, that of conforming or fitting in with the group. The reliance on
brands has shifted: brands have infiltrated pre-teens and adolescents’ inner lives. (Quart, 2003: 4)

This concept is also supported by Schor (2004) who argues vehemently against the ways that toddlers and young children are ideologically positioned through popular culture and advertising to adopt and support certain branded ideologies. Both Schor (2004) and Quart (2003) liken the kinds of approaches taken by companies to calculated psychological manipulation. As Quart purports: “The language of teen marketing is now so refined that it resembles youth sociology and psychology” (Quart, 2003: 10). Quart also makes the important point that whilst academic writing has for the most part of this century concerned itself with attempting to locate emancipatory potential through research: “The marketers who borrow the terms and methods used by scholars just want to sell” (Quart, 2003: 11). Ji (2002) uses qualitative interviews to examine the relationships between children and brands in the context of the family home, finding that children develop significant psychological relationships with brands that are “imbedded in the social environment where children live and grow” (Ji, 2002: 369). Ji argues that these brands possess valuable status in the lives of children, and produces empirical evidence to this effect. Ji draws direct links between the Barbie doll and the process of gender-role development for one of her participants, and the importance of Adidas in another participant’s concept of self-identity as an athletically inclined nine-year-old. This offers evidence to suggest that important psychological developmental stages of Ji’s subjects are being informed in major ways by corporate ideology. I believe that such concepts regarding the internalization of branding are very scary, and imply that our minds are routinely infiltrated by corporate notions of truth and affected at the very level of what it means to ‘be’. I wonder what it would be like to harbor subjectivities free of the corporate ideologies that so regularly assist us in defining our sense of self?
Finally, another strong trend to emerge within the surveyed literature is that which suggests brands and corporate-led popular culture texts thrive when producing feelings of inadequacy in the minds of consumers. In other words, successful corporate ideologies are those that effectively infiltrate the inner psyches of consumers and manipulate them into believing that the products they advertise are indispensable. In doing so, companies create various needs and wants that in all likelihood did not exist previously. A large part of this process—especially when concerning the marketing of products to young people—involves the creation of ‘cool’ brand imagery and iconography that promotes highly alluring lifestyles in which the branded product is positioned as a central and inseparable feature. Latent within such advertising is often the implication that if you don’t have the product in question, then you’re a loser. As Schor (2004) writes:

… marketers have defined cool as the key to social success, as what matters for determining who belongs, who’s popular, and who gets accepted by peers.

While there is no doubt that the desire for social acceptance is a central theme of growing up, marketers have elevated it to the sine qua non of children’s psyches. (Schor, 2004: 47)

In other words, one’s worthiness is defined by the extent to which one can acquire the branded artifacts that are given supreme currency within any given popular ideological context. Of course, this serves the company perfectly, as it keeps the endless want cycle churning, and allows for popular culture texts to serve as boundless vehicles for the promotion of brands. Such a scenario exploits the insecurities of the individual subject whose life becomes defined by a on-going process of self-surveillance, the end product of which they are essentially defined by their ability to acquire the necessary looks, styles, knowledge, and ideologies of popular culture.
In summary, and despite the pertinent examples I have canvassed, I believe that the broader picture of empirical research concerning the relationships between corporate ideologies, branding and subjectivity still lacks depth and consideration. Ji (2002) also makes this point, claiming that not enough empirical research has been compiled on the relationship formed between young people and brands, citing that the reason she conducted research was explicitly to fill this gap. In addition, I have developed the opinion that whilst lot of theory exists, research that actually utilizes the voices of young people as key data collection methods is few and far between. Initially, I was hoping to find a wealth of empirical data born of interviews with young people; interviews that attempted to deconstruct and analyze their opinions concerning the level of their involvement with popular culture, and the effects it had on their lives. Throughout this degree I have been consistently disappointed in the pursuit of this aim. This lack of evidence has forced me to question the claims of many authors who write as if branding’s negative effects are a given, yet do so with a license that apparently requires no empirical evidence. I have come to accept that ‘branding’ research—especially that which attempts to ascertain the effects of branding—is still an area of research in its infancy. In some ways, however, this lack of empirical data is oddly comforting, as it presents an area where I feel my own contribution can come to the fore. I feel this dissertation can help shed some new light on this debate, adding to the existing body of research regarding popular culture’s effects on young people in an Australian context.
Part Three - Critical Literacy and the use of popular culture in
the English classroom

In the course of this degree and readings in preparation for the production of this dissertation, I
have canvassed a wide range of empirical studies, articles and other texts that involve the analysis
of popular culture and critical literacy when pertaining to the English classroom. These texts are
of particular significance, as within my research I attempt to draw links between the effects of
popular culture and corporate ideologies on the subjectivities of young people, arguing that the
English classroom can be positioned as a critical site for deconstructing this influence. Hence, an
understanding of research compiled with respect to the use of popular culture texts in the
English classroom is indispensable.

Overall, I have come to understand that ‘popular culture in the classroom’ remains an area of
research that is often contentious, and there still lingers a paradigmatic divide between those who
espouse critical literacy perspectives, and those still guarding the merits of the literary canon.
Research from both sides is often used to support particular political campaigns, and has helped
fuel current debate regarding Australian education policy that continues to receive substantial
media attention in Australia. At the time of writing this dissertation, the conservative neoliberal
Australian federal government seems intent on favoring and promoting data of the latter variety
and both Prime Minister John Howard and various state and federal education ministers have
made bold public claims that critical literacy is having a ‘dumbing down’ effect on young people’s
literacy standards (See The Australian, 2006a/2006b; The West Australian, 2006). Such claims are in
line with a current conservative trend in Australian politics to which I am in most cases opposed.
Unfortunately, much of the (highly ignorant) Australian media favors this conservative
government’s ‘scare campaign’ to the effect that a bias and uninformed perspective regarding
critical literacy frequents public knowledge (See *The Australian*, 2006b; *The West Australian*, 2006).

Over time I have come to align myself with researchers such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Ernest Morrell, who herald from a critical perspective and argue a proactive and generally politicized stance towards the inclusion of popular texts in the classroom. These researchers argue that students can be critically empowered in various aspects of their everyday lives as a result of popular culture’s critical inclusion. Recent research of this nature has begun to argue the need for educators to adopt strategies to combat the ways that Western popular culture texts saturate young individuals in damaging corporate and/or neoliberal ideologies. For Giroux and McLaren in particular, critically deconstructing popular culture with explicit political aims in mind is viewed as merely one element of a broader ‘critical pedagogy’ that they argue teachers should adopt. I will later discuss this concept of ‘critical pedagogy’ in more detail.

In general, several key themes have emerged within this recent research that are relevant to consider in terms of my own polemic, and I will now attempt to review these in brief. They include: student empowerment through transforming the function of language and textual analysis, positive and important ‘identity work’ through critically analyzing the popular culture texts that inform students’ everyday experiences, the benefits of using “pleasurable” texts in the classroom, and the importance of maintaining an all-encompassing ‘critical pedagogy’ at the level of the educator. In addition, I will also briefly canvas research that suggests teachers risk silencing students’ everyday experiences if popular culture texts are not analyzed, and I will offer critique of the almost complete lack of research specifically regarding the in-class analysis of branding and corporate ideologies in texts. These are areas I have deemed relevant to my own research and which have direct implications for my argument. I understand they do not represent the entirety of opinion in this diverse field.
Empowerment through transforming the function of language and critical textual analysis

An intrinsic benefit of critical practice as espoused by several researchers is the high levels of empowerment students can acquire through the process of being positioned by educators to adopt a critical gaze towards particular texts (Martino and Mellor, 1995; Finders, 1996; Lewis, 1998; Comber and Simpson, 2001; Faulkner, 2003). This outcome of critical practice is transformative, affecting the actual value of language at the level of the individual, through a process of facilitating realization for the student as to the ways that aspects of power and language are intertwined in the texts they consume and the ways they are being positioned to adopt certain positions as readers.

Comber and Simpson (2001) features an collection of various empirical accounts by a range of multi-culturally located researchers—many of whom provide interesting evidence to suggest that the ways young people view language and texts can be transformed from functional to critical, and that such a facilitated shift allows these young people to realize educational and personal empowerment. For example, Urvashi Sahni writes of her subject Sheela, who “had not yet discovered the potency of written language as a symbolic and intersubjective transactional medium” (Sahni, in Comber and Simpson, 2001: 29). As Sheela learnt to appropriate language in new ways, Sahni observed that she was able to discover textual creativity, and “with it she could reposition herself with regard to the people in power and alter the power relationships for herself as she did so. She had appropriated literacy as a symbolic tool to define herself in relation to others in a way that was compatible with her vision of herself” (Sahni, in Comber and Simpson, 2001: 30). In the same collection, Angel Mei Yi Lin describes a scenario that occurred when trying to implement critical practice in a Hong Kong classroom, where a major problem was that
for students “the idea never enters their minds that written texts can be something to enjoy, to read and reread, to analyse literally, to respond to creatively and personally and so on” (Lin, in Comber and Simpson, 2001: 89). For these students, Lin argues the integral critical elements of textual deconstruction were wholly absent from their cultural ideologies and in-class practice, suggesting that they were missing out on the empowering benefits of such critical discourse.

This element of critical literacy therefore involves the particular use and analysis of language in a way that positions students to understand the implications of textual construction, and transforms textual analysis from a functional process to one that is critically empowering. What are the implications, therefore, of positing the heavily corporate-driven ideologies and language of popular culture texts as analytical material in the critical literacy classroom? What are the implications of transforming the language of popular culture?

Finders (1996) researched the ways that a group of junior high school girls known as the ‘social queens’ read the popular teen magazines *Seventeen*, *Sassy*, and *YM* to set themselves apart from a group of their classmates who they deemed socially inferior. Alvermann and Hagood (2000) offer an interesting analysis of Finders’ research, stating: “The teen magazines, in addition to ascribing a special social status to their audience of young readers, served as guides and sources of experiences that the girls appropriated as their own” (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000: 196).

Finders’ teens, “appeared neither to question the limitations imposed by the available social roles, as reflected in their heroines, nor the manner in which such roles were constructed” (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000: 196). Finder’s subjects, therefore, displayed a blind acceptance of the popular media, and used popular culture texts for functional purposes of which they were not necessarily consciously aware, yet had a major impact on the nature of their everyday social politics. Finders writes of the effects born when these students were positioned to critically analyze these
If students learn to ask questions about the construction of social roles available in all texts and are taught to analyze race, class, and gender relations as they are represented in texts, especially in other canonical works, students will learn to be critical consumers and producers of texts. (Finders, 1996: 86; cited in Alvermann and Hagood, 2000: 196)

Finders’ example is interesting because it reflects a commitment to changing the way young people think by positing the texts of their everyday experience as learning tools in the English classroom. This is in line with the same argument I make throughout this dissertation.

In addition to transforming the function of language analysis itself, research also suggests that there are several positive outcomes born of broadening the scope and types of texts used as analytical tools in classrooms. By integrating the use of other forms of language in the classroom besides the usual text-based forms, teachers are validating what has become known as multiliteracies. This is a term coined by the New London Group (See Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). Validating ‘multiliteracies’ is another example of transforming the function of language, in that the experience of language in class becomes multi-modal, rather than functional. ‘Multiliteracies’ involves moving beyond traditional language-focused approaches, towards the validation of other forms of literacy such as visual, aural and spatial literacies (Nixon and Comber, 2001: 482). The doctoral research work of Greg Hurrell (cited in Nixon and Comber, 2001) involved working with Paul Sommer, a high school English teacher in South Australia, “to reflect on the value of supplementing the reading of print fiction with the viewing of film and video in the English curriculum” (Nixon and Comber, 2001: 481). In this case, the class studied the popular magazines, observing a transformative effect:
Hollywood film *The Matrix*, and in using this text, Hurrell noted that Sommer was “not only engaging his students in the legitimated, sanctioned study of a visual text (as authorised by the curriculum document in use at his school), he was also tacitly inviting them to bring their outside-of-school experiences and knowledge into the classroom” (Nixon and Comber, 2001: 482). Hurrell also notes that “the use of texts that are in the vanguard of media convergence can also challenge students—and teachers—in ways different from those of traditional canonical texts” (Nixon and Comber, 2001: 482). This ‘Matrix’ example illustrates yet another way that the very form of language and its worth can be effectively transformed for students, bringing about new and personally empowering ways of working with texts.

A fundamental argument of my research is that the critical analysis of the language of popular culture will help students to re-think the ways in which they are being positioned by the texts that predominately inform their everyday experiences. Ideally I believe such analytical work that transforms the function of language and textual analysis—and concomitantly broadens the types of texts studied—will empower young people to imagine worlds beyond the limiting consumer-orientated experiences available in popular culture. For this to occur, the language of popular culture texts and the ways they are used in the classroom must take on a transformative role. I feel that my research contributes to this debate about the way language is used in and out of classroom contexts by firstly trying to investigate the ways that students appropriate the language of popular culture, and secondly by trying to gauge student opinion regarding the ways that the language of these texts is dealt with in their English classrooms.
‘Identity work’ - through critically analyzing popular culture texts

If the language of popular culture is to a significant degree the language of youth culture, then it seems fair to suggest that this ‘popular language’ can be utilized as an analytical tool through which students can investigate concepts of self. In doing so, students may begin to realize the ways they are being positioned by popular texts to assume certain subjectivities. Several researchers have investigated this concept of ‘identity work’ through popular text analysis (Dyson, 1997; Lewis, 1998; Alvermann and Hagood, 2000; Finders, 2000). As the concept of subjectivity formation is central to my research, such research is of particular interest, as it offers some insight into the ways that the influences of popular culture on the identities of young people can be proactively addressed in the English classroom, and other learning contexts.

Lewis (1998) offers some interesting examples of this kind of ‘identity work’ in which students participate when dealing with popular culture texts in the classroom. Lewis begins by noting an interesting contradiction: that educators often validate their own experiences and identities through the appropriation of popular culture, yet concurrently police and silence students’ attempts to do the same. Lewis writes of her own 13-year-old son who was reprimanded by a teacher at his school who questioned the correctness of a “rock t-shirt” he was wearing at school, due to the fact that the particular teacher found it offensive. Lewis argues that in policing and excluding students in this way “we set up limiting dichotomies” (Lewis, 1998: 116). Lewis then moves on to investigate the idea of “free choice” with regards to classroom situations where teachers allow students to bring in their own texts and investigate their own topics for learning purposes. Lewis says that given free choice, students feel empowered to introduce cultural symbols and materials that are not often legitimated by other adults in their lives, and with the guidance of a critical educator they can partake in important ‘identity work’ (Lewis, 1998: 118).
Dyson (1997) surveys ways that a primary school teacher was able to position students to think about their own lives and identities, through analyzing ways that “the superhero” was represented in a range of texts. Dyson uses ethnographic data collected in one classroom over several years and surveys the way that a teacher, Kristin, “introduced the class to the idea that superheroes can be found in schoolroom texts about Greek myths and in real-life people as well as in video games, comics, and trading cards” (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000: 196). In other words, Kristin attempted to highlight links between traditional and popular texts, and in doing so was able to engage students in an analysis of their own identities and concepts relevant to their everyday lives.

However, despite these examples, some research suggests that negative experiences can also occur when teachers encourage students to investigate their own identities through popular textual analysis. Finders’ (2000) offers interesting evidence of the important ways that students’ identities can be deconstructed in the classroom, however her work also highlights some of the problematic factors that can emerge through using popular texts in such ways. Finders notes how male students would verge on a range of inappropriate and sexist discussions when talking about texts such as *Low Rider Magazine*, a bike magazine that included many images of bikini clad women next to the machinery. Finders writes of the explicit conversations that her male subjects had regarding the magazine, noting that this would cause her much anxiety. In other words, as a result of enabling the voices of students to explore and negotiate their own identities through texts of their everyday interest, concerns such as the issue of sex and sexuality were commonly brought to the fore of classroom discussion. Finders says she would “silence” these conversations because they made her feel uncomfortable, and notes that a main reason for this was because she didn’t have the language necessary to talk about such issues in a classroom context. This is interesting, as Finders is making the point that if teachers are not equipped with the required “language” or experience to deal with such issues that arise, they may find
themselves heading into water too deep to handle, or resorting to silencing such debates. In my view, such silencing is problematic as it is contradictory to the very purpose of highlighting concepts of analysis in the first place. Buckingham (2003a) also explores this issue, noting:

In bringing popular culture into the classroom, we inevitably bring with it a whole range of desires and experiences that are often left unspoken in schools; and where they are spoken, they are often policed out of existence . . . Teachers have a responsibility to make the classroom a functioning and mutually respectful community. (Buckingham, 2003a: 325)

Such research informs my perspective in the sense that I am aware of the fact that dealing with texts in such a way is not something that will always be comfortable for teachers and in certain contexts may not always garner positive results. This is despite the fact that my own research attempts to forge a strong argument for the inclusion of such analysis. My own experiences as a teacher and researcher suggest that if teachers are capable of engaging students in such identity work—and manage to do so both critically and without losing control—then the deeply positive experiences that abound rein paramount. This is an area of concern that I actively try to address when arguing the inclusion of popular culture for the purposes of ‘identity work’ in classes.

Pleasure and the popular

Issues surrounding the use of “pleasurable” texts in the classroom frequent debates concerning popular culture and English education, with researchers arguing various perspectives (Lewis, 1998; Alvermann and Hagood 2000; Buckingham, 2003a; Faulkner, 2003; Williams, 2004/2005).
Studies I have canvassed suggest that introducing the deep analysis of texts that are regularly consumed for pleasure in the everyday lives of students is not without its problems (See Buckingham, 2003a), yet research predominately suggests that despite such troubles, the benefits of mobilizing the analysis of texts from which students commonly derive pleasure in their personal domains will ultimately dominate.

‘Pleasurable texts’ are of particular interest to this dissertation, as I argue that a further integration and analysis of popular culture texts in the English classroom is required, which inadvertently welcomes texts of a pleasurable nature to young people. Pleasure, therefore, was an area of concern within my data collection phase, and during my semi-structured interviews I quizzed students on their levels of enjoyment gained from the study of a variety of text types in the English classroom. Also, in sections of my quantitative survey I asked students to rank their levels of enjoyment for both consuming and studying a variety of popular culture text types. During interviews, I often asked students how they would feel if their favourite song, movie or Internet site was introduced by a teacher as an object of analysis in the classroom. I did so in the attempt to find out whether or not students would react negatively to the formal in-class analysis of something that they placed a degree of personal value upon. My own research garnered a mixed student response, yet in line with current research data it ultimately suggests that students feel they benefit from the critical analysis of pleasurable texts.

Faulkner (2003) generates evidence to suggest that students derive positive pleasure when popular culture texts are introduced into the classroom, but notes the uneasiness often felt by educators when this occurs. “This is perhaps another reason that English teachers are distrustful of the popular,” writes Faulkner, adding: “Historically, pleasure has not been associated with “real” learning; in fact, we tend to oppose pleasure with deeper understanding” (Faulkner, 2003:
Faulkner notes that the everyday experiences of students are in opposition to English classrooms that often still pride cultural heritage pedagogies, and makes a strong argument that pleasurable experiences can be both meaningful and critically mobilizing. Such an argument is particularly close to home. Faulkner uses her student participant Hsui as an illustrative example, noting how Hsui speaks about her reaction to watching the film *Jerry McGuire* in English class. Faulkner writes that in addition to locating the film’s values, Hsui also demonstrated within her positive responses, an ability to “construct the feeling as knowing wish/fulfillment, as well as being able to identify the appealing textual features. Hsui desires this sort of viewing experience, yet she can observe clearly how it is acting upon her and describe her responses” (Faulkner 2003: 50). In doing so, Hsui is demonstrating important skills in terms of being able to understand and respond to elements of visual literacy. Faulkner quotes several other students who discuss the ways in which viewing popular culture texts such as films in the context of school made them appreciate or analyze the film from a different perspective—hence mobilizing a critical viewing of a text that would have otherwise being left uncritically consumed in their everyday lives. Referring to the film *Men In Black*, her participant Mike says he “learnt to appreciate the film from a different angle . . . It was so much more interesting the second time I saw the film . . . the second time I really connected and saw the film for what it was and the way it sort of made fun of itself” (Faulkner, 2003: 52). Faulkner’s data supports the concept that introducing texts into the classroom that students are likely to have already viewed in their own time for pleasure is of utmost importance. It allows teachers to draw important links between the everyday experiences of their students and the critical process of learning with the English classroom.

Buckingham (2003a) offers a critical perspective on this matter and surveys some of the tribulations born of dealing with pleasure and popular culture in the classroom. Although his emphasis is on the Media classroom, such arguments are clearly transferable to the English
classroom. By referring to a range of empirical studies that concentrate on Media classrooms in recent years, Buckingham surveys the concept of play and pleasure in the production of students’ own media texts, and in doing so highlights various limitations of such work. Buckingham refers to Grace and Tobin (1998) and their research concerning a video production assessment item in a Hawaiian elementary classroom, noting the ways the participating students would often produce work that was heavily influenced by popular culture and frequently transgressed the norms and conventions of school life (Buckingham, 2003a: 319). Buckingham notes that whilst most productions were “unproblematic, others showed actions and situations or used language that the adults in authority considered rude, inappropriate, or unacceptable” (Buckingham 2003a: 319). Buckingham writes that such a project allowed students to uncover spaces of pleasure and to have their everyday interests and experiences validated in the classroom, however, when given this leeway into the more risqué curriculum waters, the work of these students in some cases bordered on types of political incorrectness that school systems commonly try to silence.

Buckingham analyzes the ways that Grace and Tobin’s students would parody disabled characters, native Hawaiian culture and stereotypical gender representations, noting: “While Grace and Tobin acknowledge the difficulties here, they argue that this "carnivalesque" approach allows such differences to be represented and addressed, rather than ignored or wished away” (Buckingham 2003a: 319).

I find this uneasy relationship that Buckingham highlights to be quite interesting in terms of this dissertation, and my own experience as a teacher in both the English and Media classroom. Recently, a group of my year nine media students produced an excellent “crime” parody for a short-film production task. However, during the final scene—and after an abolition of all the ‘bad guys’ in a spray of machine guns—the film’s heroes (the cops) are sitting down talking, when an obviously effeminate male character walks into frame and makes a sexually suggestive
comment to these ‘tough guys’. The cops proceed to shoot this “gay” character dead, and then the final credits roll. This ‘final touch’ to the film—added, according to the students for comic relief—was received with a roar of laughter by the class when viewing the piece, and was obviously a pleasurable experience for most students until my wrath of political correctness curtailed the experience. I was unaware that this extra final scene had been included in the film, so upon the film’s ending I was left to discuss the implications of the inclusion of this final scene with the class. Surprisingly, the class responded in a very mature and analytical fashion when I quizzed them about why they laughed so much and whether or not such imagery was acceptable. Many students came to the conclusion that it was a common social stereotype to portray gay men as stupid and in negative ways, and many students produced comments such as “Yeah I laughed, but it’s not right” and “they shouldn’t have included that shot in the film”. If I had seen the shot during editing, I probably would have made the students remove it, however, the inclusion of the shot was actually of broader benefit in the long run as it opened up space in the classroom for an important issue to discussed, in light of an actual example that was pertinent, current, and student-produced. Through this initially pleasurable yet politically incorrect experience, students ultimately gained worthwhile personal knowledge through a guided critical discussion.

In this personal example, I was an integral factor in guiding the nature of the learning experience—steering it in a particular critical direction. Finders (2000) writes of how she attempted to implement a similar critical approach to using popular culture texts as presented by Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) that posits the teacher as a “critical guide to pleasure consumption” (Finders, 2000: 147): “This approach attempts to address the issues of analysis, pleasure positioning, and audience so that a balance is created in the classroom. In this approach the teacher recognizes several critical points: the expertise that students bring to the classroom, the pleasures that popular culture produces for students, and the multiple readings that students
produce from popular culture” (Finders 2000: 147-148). Finders reports that this approach worked quite successfully in most circumstances, creating safe spaces for the analysis of texts, however, problems rose to the fore when it came to time negotiate the analysis or discussion of the pleasurable aspects of the texts. Finders writes of how students would abuse the chance to bring in their own texts or source their own texts on the Internet by purposefully accessing pornography or by making politically incorrect statements during analysis of discussion. Finders notes that students would transcend such boundaries on purpose and in order to gain a reaction from their peers. I can relate to this experience, as I found such issues to be of paramount difficulty, when working in a technologically progressive yet very low socio-economic school in Harringey, London. Students at this school would often abuse ‘net privileges’ and access pornographic imagery for laughs and personal pleasure, when they were supposed to be working on research projects. In Finders’ example, she notes that she was not prepared for such events to occur and found them difficult to deal with. Finders’ research is advisory is the sense that it highlights that whilst popular culture opens up new and engaging possibilities for critical analysis, the ways that pleasure from these are negotiated needs to monitored within safe and balanced frameworks, and implemented by a knowledgeable and experienced teacher as a critical facilitator.

Critical pedagogy - a necessary ingredient

Current research literature regarding critical literacy suggests that effective critical pedagogical practice requires an all-encompassing “critical approach to teaching texts” (O’Brien, in Comber and Simpson, 2001: 38), whereby educators adopt an ongoing and proactive critical position towards processes of textual deconstruction in the classroom. Research and theory also suggests that the various emancipatory aims of critical literacy are wholly unachievable without the
presence of an educator with a commitment to critical teacher discourse and a concomitant
ability to effectively facilitate such practice (Lewis, 1998; Comber and Simpson, 2001; Harden,
2001; Morrell, 2002; Giroux, 2004; Hinchey, 2004). In other words, in the absence of an
inspiring, critically motivated and capable educator, the intrinsic aims of critical literacy cannot be
achieved. My experiences as an educator and a researcher support this view in every way, and I
have developed a particular interest in the significant ways that individual teacher pedagogies
work to influence the nature of students’ learning experiences.

As such, the concept of ‘critical pedagogy’ is of particular interest to this dissertation, as it is
through its maintenance that I argue English educators can begin to empower students in the
deep and purposefully politicized analysis of popular culture texts in the classroom. At present, I
am redefining my views on critical pedagogy praxis, in line with the growing influence of writers
such as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren. McLaren et al. (2004) describe this as a “revolutionary
critical pedagogy” (McLaren et al., 2004: 139), designed to resist the ‘capitalization of
subjectivity’. I realize that Giroux and McLaren are reasonably radical in their views and their
work is not always viewed in sympathetic terms by a growing legion of liberal and conservative
academics. As I later discuss, one reason for this may be due to the fact that both writers are
critical of academics and educators who believe in engaging students in the active and critical
deconstruction of texts, yet who fail to further this process towards more explicitly political aims
(See Giroux, 2005: 36-37). McLaren et al. (2004) are particularly unrelenting in their attack on
existing manifestations of critical pedagogy, writing that it is “currently watered down like rum
and coke in a cheap roadside bar” (McLaren et al., 2004: 141), adding that in many cases—and
despite the best efforts of many critical educators—it serves to “rehabilitate the very class
hierarchies that it was originally set up to challenge” (McLaren et al., 2004: 141). What I find
particularly appealing about the views of McLaren et al. (2004) is the argument that the current
aims and results of critical pedagogy “do not go nearly far enough” (McLaren et al., 2004: 139) and that in light of the crisis of intensifying global capitalist relations, “we need to develop a critical pedagogy capable of engaging all of social life and not simply life inside school classrooms” (McLaren et al., 2004: 139). In Giroux’s (2004) view, teachers bear a significant responsibility as ‘public intellectuals’ to oppose “neoliberalism by bringing democratic political culture back to life” (Giroux, 2004: 35). This involves, writes Giroux:

Constructing new locations of struggle, vocabularies, and subject positions that allow people in a wide variety of public spheres to become more than they are now, to question what it is they have become within existing institutional and social formations, and to give some thought to what it might mean to transform existing relations of subordination and oppression. (Giroux, 2004: 35)

In considering this quote, it becomes clear as to how my hopes of ‘transforming subjectivities’ in resistance to the corporate ideologies of popular culture are harmonious with the aims of critical pedagogy. Furthermore, this quote illuminates why critical pedagogy praxis involves far more than a mere ‘set of critical activities’ that can be intermittently deployed by teachers who wish to provide ‘lessons’ in critical literacy. Rather, critical pedagogy is a solidly political endeavour, rigorous, intelligent and driven towards the improvement of democratic social life.

In terms of empirical research to investigate critical pedagogy in classrooms, data is far from prevalent. Theory, however, seems to abound, yet rarely sheds adequate light on examples of effective critical practice at work in real-life situations. As Frank (1993) writes: “The literature in critical theory and critical pedagogy generally lacks visualizations of classroom practice. The literature also provides little information describing the experiences which lead teachers towards
critical pedagogy” (Frank, 1993). Although written by Frank over a decade ago, my reading suggests that very little has changed, and these kinds of “visualisations” as to how teachers can effectively produce and maintain critical pedagogies at a ‘grass roots’ level still lack in frequency. Despite this, a small measure of recent literature does exist that provides evidence in support of a required critical pedagogy; often born of rare empirical class-based research that investigates and models exemplary critical pedagogy practice in real-life situations. A majority of this research clearly argues the benefits of educators maintaining effective critical pedagogies (Lewis, 1998; Alvermann, Moon and Hagood, 1999; Hewitson, 1999; Comber and Simpson, 2001).

O’Brien (in Comber and Simpson: 2001) offers such insight into the practical workings of an effective critical pedagogy. O’Brien argues the importance of introducing a whole new set of teaching practices, and in a sense a whole new critical pedagogical position, with the aim of producing critically empowered readers (O’Brien, in Comber and Simpson 2001: 38). O’Brien argues that too many educators erroneously assume that critical literacy can simply be achieved by asking students particular questions, studying particular texts and providing certain activities within the classroom. I agree entirely with this argument, and I believe such flawed views are too commonly implied in critical literacy ‘how to’ texts. O’Brien suggests that a consistent commitment to critical discourse is needed by educators. O’Brien presents this notion of an all-encompassing ‘critical approach’ to texts in the context of her own experiences as a teacher, and highlights many positive and negative experiences that she has endured as the result of her various attempts to maintain a critical pedagogy in her classrooms. Along with many examples of how critical and positive learning environments were produced, O’Brien also includes an interesting example of how non-critical teacher pedagogy can silence students’ critical faculties; an element of particular concern to my own research.
Generally, research suggests that an effective critical pedagogy requires the educator to take on an interventionist role in the fabric of classroom discourse, interrupting social norms, drawing attention to gaps and silences, and guiding the flow of analysis through critical dialogue that is relevant to the everyday experiences of young people. Giroux (2005) calls this a ‘liberatory critical pedagogy’, whereby the teacher actively intervenes in the process of learning in the hope of empowering students to recognize their power as social agents; mobilizing them towards more critical and resistive ways of thinking (Giroux, 2005: ¶33). Sahni (in Comber and Simpson 2001) canvasses this idea of “critical intervention” on the part of the teacher, positioning the educator as an active agent for social change. Sahni highlights this point by using an example from her own teaching in a second grade class, in a rural primary school in Jannaki bagh, India. Sahni writes of how she was able to introduce critical and reflective processes of learning to children to highlight the imaginative possibilities of language previously concealed by a lacklustre and functional ‘rote learning’ approach to literacy. Moving the curriculum away from this purely rudimentary mode, Sahni introduced a new model for learning, increasing student choice in matters of text choice and production and introducing various popular text forms such as song, story, and drama. The result was the mobilization of learning experiences that positioned Sahni’s students to realize the power and role of language in various text forms. Lewis (1998) also highlights the importance of an interventionist approach, yet for the explicit purpose of addressing violent masculine discourse with her students. Lewis refers to a group of boys in the class she researched who were discussing horror films, and were going into detail about the ways and types of murders in these texts. The boys, writes Lewis, were engaging in a form of verbal discourse that is important in locating their own positions in terms of ideas of taste and fear, however, they were also “keeping with the masculinist discourse that dominates outside the classroom language that values violence” (Lewis, 1998: 117). In addition, their talk often concentrated on discussing violence towards women that was naturalized in such texts. Lewis
makes the important point that, “while the boys we listened in on clearly were engaged in the social work of appropriating popular culture for their own important uses, a steady diet of such conversations would not help them to understand its constitutive process” (Lewis, 1998: 118). Lewis’ argument therefore suggests that whilst it is important for students to sometimes have the space to freely discuss popular texts, critical teacher invention is also needed to stop students from merely appropriating the trends of popular culture. This is of particular significance to my work as a researcher and is also linked to issues regarding pleasurable texts in the English classroom, because if permitted, bringing popular culture into the classroom can sometimes do little more than harvest replications of the same ideologies we may be trying to combat.

Critical pedagogy, therefore, should involve the teacher ‘making available’ new reading practices that position students to approach texts from a particular angle and with a purposeful gaze. Martino (in Comber and Simpson, 2001) elaborates upon this idea, describing how he was able to create conducive environments for critical thought regarding masculinity, by introducing a gender-based reading practice in a school where such reading practices had not been previously implemented. Martino did so by providing a critical framework and an appropriate popular culture text to allow students to consider the topic of homophobia, and “the boys were encouraged to read in this way as a result of the questions asked in response to the text” (Martino, 2001; in Comber and Simpson 2001: 181). Martino encouraged students to reflect critically on issues of masculinity in their lives, and in doing so approached the concept of cultural stereotypes with a particular critical outcome in mind. Martino’s text serves as a reminder that any sort of critical pedagogy is always and necessarily political, and that critical teacher involvement becomes a moral and ethical endeavour, outwardly politicizing the teaching process. In fact, much critical pedagogy theory of late has emerged arguing the importance of dealing explicitly with pertinent political and social issues, especially current North American texts that
highlight the need for educators to address social issues born of the Bush administration’s troubling neoliberal campaigns (See Giroux, 2004; McLaren et al., 2004). Corporate-driven popular culture texts rely upon selling hegemonic versions of masculinity, race, gender, and class—amongst others—in order to make profit in a capitalist market place. Hence, there are many activist positions that educators can take in addressing the branded nature of texts. The work of researchers such as Lewis and Martino is significant, as it offers insight into ways that various forms of hegemonic ideology can be addressed through in-class analysis. Furthermore, such work typifies the ways that popular culture texts can be used in conjunction with an intelligent critical pedagogy to empower students in their learning; serving as a strong reminder that effective critical literacy practice can only occur in environments in which informed and dedicated critical practitioners reside.

In terms of my research, I attempted to ascertain how effective my participants felt their English teachers were in terms of critically utilizing popular culture texts in the classroom. The resulting data suggested that there was a distinct lack of critical pedagogical practice at work in the English classrooms at my sample school, and that many students felt their English teachers lacked the ability to work with popular culture texts at all, let alone critically. Overall, data suggested that far too many English teachers were inadequately versed in critical practice, with many continuing to reject even basic notions of critical literacy in preference for dated cultural heritage pedagogies. I believe this highlights a serious problem, especially when considering the extent to which empowering deconstructive analysis relies upon the presence of an educator with a developed critical pedagogy and the skills necessary to harness and develop effective critical learning experiences. Critical pedagogy, therefore, faces a dilemma in the sense that in many cases it simply doesn’t exist. Furthermore—and in line with the arguments of McLaren et al. (2004)—when it does, its manifestations are often far from its theoretical purpose.
The risk of silencing students’ everyday experiences if popular culture texts are not analyzed

Research I have thus far reviewed suggests clearly that young people consume popular culture texts more commonly than other text forms and that the ideologies of these texts inform their subjectivities in significant ways. It would therefore seem apt to suggest that students may feel distanced from curriculums and pedagogical practices that pride knowledge and texts that are not relevant to their everyday experiences. I believe there is still a canonical fixation at large in the pedagogies of many English educators, and this is isolating students from the empowering possibilities of relevant popular culture textual analysis. In fact, the very title of this dissertation suggests that the everyday experiences of youth are at risk of being silenced by English educators who fail to recognize and critically analyze the texts prevalent in the everyday lives of students.

Morrell (2002) argues that a re-thinking of pedagogy is required to avoid schools becoming obsolete in light of the rapidly changing textual worlds of today’s students. Buckingham (2003a) furthers this argument, writing that a new divide is emerging in education: a divide between what happens outside and inside school (Buckingham, 2003a: 312). Buckingham (2003a) adds:

While the social and cultural experiences of young people have been dramatically changed over the past fifty years, schools have not kept pace with the change.

The classrooms of today would be easily recognizable to the pioneers of public education of the mid-nineteenth century. (Buckingham, 2003a: 312)

Morrell (2002) argues that as classrooms increase in terms of student diversity in experience, “educators struggle to find curricula and pedagogical strategies that are inclusive and affirmative
yet facilitate the development of academic and critical literacies” (Morrell, 2002: 72). Morrell argues that the critical analysis of popular culture can help students acquire and develop the literacies needed to navigate their ideological spaces, deconstruct dominant narratives and offer artillery to fight oppressive practices. Morrell argues that this will hopefully help forge a more egalitarian and inclusive society. Morrell suggests that popular culture can be included into the framework of a traditional curriculum in order to increase the relevance and potency of teaching practice by validating the everyday popular texts that students pride and consume so readily.

Faulkner (2003) writes that: “The role of popular culture in teenagers’ lives must be understood and not judged as inferior to an adults cultural preferences” (Faulkner, 2003: 54), adding that in recognizing the everyday popular culture experiences of youth, it “shifts the focus from teacher as a guardian of cultural values to students and their uses of popular texts” (Ibid). Drawing upon the work of Bernstein (1999), Faulkner argues that the everyday textual practices of youth are in contrast to the hierarchically organized forms of knowledge valued by schooling (Faulkner, 2003: 53). Faulkner writes that although her research indicates that “students already have sophisticated ways of reading popular texts” (Faulkner, 2003: 54), they rarely do so in a critical sense and need to be positioned to do so. This is line with my argument that whilst it is crucial not to silence the everyday experiences of youth, such experiences must be positioned within a critical framework. Lewis (1998) also warns that without the critical analysis of popular culture, educators risk validating the limiting subject positions often present within its texts, writing: “the popular culture of young people is not about individual voices and identities … popular culture is related to social and cultural group identities, allegiances, and exclusions” (Lewis, 1998: 118). She adds: “At the global level, popular culture is even more removed from the individual expressions of voice and identity since it is produced largely through multinational corporations and disseminated across a wide range of audiences and geographies” (Lewis 1998: 118).
Overall, such research highlights the importance for English educators to begin to realize the important influence that corporate-driven popular culture texts have on the subjectivities and everyday lives of young people. This will pave the way for the creation of learning experiences that will validate the everyday experiences of youth by engaging students in the critical and meaningful analysis of popular culture texts in class.

The distinct lack of research regarding the in-class analysis of branding and corporate ideologies

As a final note, I feel it is beneficial to briefly mention the lack of existing classroom-based empirical research that investigates pedagogical practices designed to engage young people in the critical analysis of branding and corporate ideologies specifically. Research often alludes to the value of analyzing such concepts, yet generally does so in arguing the benefits of popular culture analysis more broadly (Lewis, 1998; Finders, 2000; Faulkner 2003). Also, whilst a measure of case-study research exists that investigates classroom scenarios in which students have been positioned to analyze race, gender, body image and a range of other social justice issues, very little data exists that investigates the effects of positioning students to think about the corporatization of the popular culture texts that so readily inform their lives. One reason for this may be that concepts of ‘branding’ and ‘corporate ideology’ are still relatively taboo—if not wholly absent—within critical literacy literature and are rarely positioned as pertinent issues to address. Critical literacy ‘how to’ literature is often limited to basic discussions of target audience or simple analyses of advertising conventions when attempting to investigate the role of corporate influence in texts. As a result, I believe very few educators choose to politicize their teaching with such issues in mind; making it difficult for researchers to gather related empirical data.
Chapter 3 - Methodology.

Part One - Methodology: An overview of major influences

During this first part, I will highlight the significance of my positionality and articulate my interpretive framework. I will also provide the reader with an overview of the four major influences that inform my methodological position and briefly explain their implications.

Mapping my ‘positionality’ and ‘interpretive framework’

As a researcher heavily influenced by Foucauldian theory, I herald from the belief that my own subjectivity as a researcher and as a human individual is contextually dependent, ever-changing and that multiple paradigms of knowledge exist in a flurry around me everyday. In other words, ‘the researcher I’ is located within a myriad of discursive fields, and is never wholly known. Having acknowledged this, it may therefore seem inane to attempt to explicate for the reader my positionality and interpretive framework—given the fluidity of influences manifest—yet I believe that such an attempt to reveal important details of my contextual location is actually an important way to offer the most ‘transparent’ view I can of the compounding influences that shape the methodology of this research. As Crotty (1998) suggests, one’s theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance informing the entire methodology and provides the context for research process, logic and criteria (Crotty, 1998: 3); hence, it is of utmost importance to make this aspect of one’s influence as clear as possible. I believe that as a result of making the reader privy to relevant information regarding my positionality and key paradigmatic influences, they are better equipped to understand the complex reasons why I have launched this particular investigative
endeavour. In partaking in this ‘mapping process’, I am inverting the gaze in order to posit myself as the locus of my own analytical concern, realizing it is my own positionality that in fact filters, moulds and wholly determines the entirety of knowledge produced within this research text.

I view the concept of ‘positionality’ as simply meaning the way a researcher is theoretically positioned in relation to their research, and I believe that my positionality is very important due to the fact that “how we think about something makes a considerable difference in how we act” (Apple, 1999: 10). Hinchey (1998) reminds us that: “The way humans perceive things is influenced by their personal circumstances and personal views of the world” (Hinchey, 1998: 11), and that “being immersed in a culture limits our imagination and consequently affects our choices and actions” (Hinchey, 1998: 11). Hence, my epistemology and the way I am positioned in relation to the world and its elements unwittingly affects the types of actions I have taken throughout the production of this research, and has therefore influenced the knowledge I have produced. Caelli et al. (2003) write of the importance of one’s positionality in terms of ‘theoretical positioning’, and remind us of the fact that a researcher is by no means neutral in their role:

… theoretical positioning refers to the researcher’s motives, presuppositions, and personal history that leads him or her toward, and subsequently shapes, a particular inquiry. A researcher’s motives for engaging with a particular study topic are never a naive choice. The notion of researchers as value neutral observers has long been challenged and overturned. (Caelli, et al., 2003: 9)

Positioning is further amplified by what is commonly referred to as ‘disciplinary socialization’, a process that “occurs when a researcher receives his or research training within a disciplinary culture or setting where a particular approach is well known and accepted. Researchers within that
disciplinary or local linguistic community are conversant with the approach, its conventions, and what it represents, and these become part of the taken-for-granted life world of the researcher” (Bernstein, 1991; cited in Caelli et al., 2003: 10). Determining how I have been socialized in this manner has involved a reflection on the traditions of thought in which I have been previously schooled and considerations of how these affect my theoretical framework. My undergraduate degree was heavily influenced by the cultural studies tradition and I now realize that this influence has had an irreversible effect on the way I now approach each and every aspect of my life; and has shaped my worldview and epistemological stance regarding the construction of knowledge and truth. In heralding from this paradigm, I realize that my views are undeniably constructivist in that they are informed by a belief in the reality of the world as a social and linguistic construct (Patton, 2002: 96). Furthermore, I believe that “all of our understandings are contextually embedded, interpersonally forged, and necessarily limited” (Neimeyer, 1993: 1-2). I would even go as far as siding with Crotty (1998) who asserts: “All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception” (Crotty, 1998: 54). The disciplinary socialization I have received as a result of cultural studies has led me to live by the mantra that all truth and reality is not just a construct in itself, but that it will also be understood differently depending on one’s context. Hence: context is all. The study of cultural studies has also led to my connection with the paradigms of critical theory, critical pedagogy and the work of Foucault—all of which are related to and congruent with the disciplinary discourse of cultural studies. In addition to cultural studies, I have also been socialized by the discourse of the media and journalism, through degree study and my extensive history as a music journalist for a range of publications in both Australia and the UK. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation I have worked concurrently as a freelance music writer for a variety of music and culture magazines. This affects the nature of my interest in popular culture in many ways as I am so intrinsically linked to its production and I have an extensive knowledge of the ways popular culture material is linked to advertising revenue and brand promotion.
In terms of my theoretical framework, I advocate a hybrid paradigmatic framework in the sense that I choose to relate to several paradigms instead of naively believing that my methodological influences can be bound to just one. Influenced by Kincheloe (2001), I have begun referring to this as a ‘bricolage of paradigms’, as a way of conceptualizing the kind of multi-paradigmatic methodological position I inhabit as a researcher. Schram (2003) also favours such an approach and writes of the ways that as researchers we often ‘connect’ with several paradigms:

My use of the phrase “connecting with a paradigm” rather than claiming or adopting a paradigm is deliberate . . . Most researchers do tend to emphasize their connection with one or another paradigm, while some situate their inquiry within a synthesis of two or more paradigms. (Schram, 2003: 37)

In other words, it would be apt to suggest that I actively ‘connect’ with critical theory, cultural studies, critical pedagogy theory, autoethnography, Foucauldian theory regarding subjectivity and discourse analysis, and constructivist research regarding the study of “the multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (Patton, 2002: 96). It would also be apt to suggest that elements of all of these paradigms work together to create my overarching theoretical framework, that in turn influences my methodological decisions. Of course, it is important not to forget that my positionality, disciplinary socialization and my personal history as a subject all work to influence the way I interpret and use these multiple paradigms—so that the end result is therefore a complex and highly personalized hybrid framework. I believe that even though this is a confusing way to look at things, it is also probably far closer to the cacophonic truth, whereby certain influences are emphasized over others in order to give the reader a ‘helping hand’ to understand where I am
methodologically located. This refusal to view my influences as residing within neatly segregated paradigms is in line with the opinions of Atkinson, Delamont and Hammersley (1998) who write:

… classifying researchers into neatly segregated “paradigms” or “traditions” does not reflect the untidy realities of real scholars . . . and may become an end in itself. “Traditions” must be treated not as clearly defined, real entities but only as loose frameworks for dividing research . . . (Atkinson, et al., 1988: 243)

In advocating such a hybrid/bricolage approach, I believe it is therefore impossible to clarify an exact theoretical framework, however, I feel that it is possible to map my position within a flurry of paradigmatic thought, ideology and contextual meandering—at the specific point in time and context in which this research has taken place. In doing so, I feel it is important to canvas the major influences and key paradigms of knowledge I connect with as a researcher.

Major Influences

Methodologically this study is informed by four major influences: critical theory and research, Foucauldian theory on subjectivity and discourse analysis, autoethnography, and a commitment to positioning the often-silenced student voice as a prime analytical tool. It is important to realize that these influences are not only interrelated in many ways, but are each informed by a myriad of other paradigmatic influences. I have chosen only to cover these four main areas of influence in this chapter, as it would be cumbersome, overly complex and in some ways irrelevant to this dissertation to attempt to map the entirety of influences informing my theoretical framework.
Critical research can be best understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name critical must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor, unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness . . . critical researchers often regard their work as the first step towards forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself.

(Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994: 140)

My interest in critical research—and critical theory and pedagogy—is the result of my undergraduate study of cultural studies and my subsequent interest in the work of Foucault and Adorno. I became especially fascinated with Foucauldian theories on subjectivity around the same time that I began teaching high school English and Media in 2001 and my turbulent experiences as a teacher quickly led me to become highly agitated by the ways that I felt the school system disenfranchised the lives of its student clientele. I became interested in the ‘types’ of subjects schools seemed to be producing and this led me to reflect in depth upon the way I was socialized throughout my own schooling experiences. As a teacher I also found myself surrounded by a new generation of youth and I became increasingly interested in the ways that their subjectivities seemed so influenced by the branded ideologies in popular culture texts. When I began my MEd (Research) I soon discovered critical education writers such as Freire, Giroux and McLaren—whose work heavily influenced and further politicized my views regarding education. Such theory led me to further develop an inherently ‘politcized stance’ towards the school system, and a belief
in the need for reform. In time I have come to align myself with the ‘critical pedagogy’ theories
promoted by these writers, and I continue to do so despite the growing knowledge that it is an
approach often controversial and not always viewed in sympathetic terms by some academics.

My research endeavour is unashamedly ‘critical’ in its various motivations, and emancipation is at
the heart of my work. My relationship to the subject matter herein is both personal and political,
and grounded in a belief that the knowledge I am producing can be utilized to highlight various
issues that I feel require discussion and action within society. The eventual aim of my research is
to serve the empowerment of individuals—grounded in a belief in the possibilities of creating
‘empowering pedagogies’ that can mobilize students towards a better understanding of the ways
that the discursive formations in popular culture position them to adopt various subjectivities. I
feel there is a lack of such empowering practice in schools at present, and as a result I feel that
students rarely reflect critically upon these areas of concern. This has methodological implications
in the sense that there has been a desire on my part to produce knowledge that highlights the
extent to which young people’s subjectivities are informed by popular culture and the corporate
ideologies latent within them, and to also highlight the extent to which empowering discourse in
schools is lacking when concerning the analysis of these influences. My hope is that this
knowledge will point teachers towards a better understanding of the issues that surround popular
culture and highlight reasons why they should further deploy the empowering meaningful analysis
of these texts on a regular basis. Whilst I do not believe that the media passively influences young
people—as I will later discuss—I do feel that popular culture’s influence has the potential to
oppress and cause certain levels of powerlessness. I feel that popular culture texts can have
limiting effects, and it is on this basis that I write in the name of ‘social transformation’ and
‘cultural emancipation’ (See Thomas, 1993; Kincheloe and McLaren 1994; Rhoads 1994). I believe
that political action is needed in order to ensure that young people have access to empowering
environments so that they can be furthered mobilized to think critically and make better
judgements about their worlds. In order for this to take place, I feel that a critical pedagogy needs
to be deployed by educators in this field.

My methodology and methods are therefore also inherently political and intrinsically tied to issues
of power. Lather (1991)—citing Gouldner (1970)—asserts that methods in critical research are
politically charged “as they define, control, evaluate, manipulate and report” (Gouldner, 1970: 50;
cited in Lather 1991: 110) and argues that for a critical researcher, the line between emancipatory
inquiry and liberatory pedagogy blurs, “where the central issue is how to bring together
scholarship and advocacy in order to generate new ways of knowing that interrupt power
imbalances” (Lather 1991: 110). Lather borrows the term ‘transformative intellectuals’ (Aronowitz
and Giroux 1985), to describe researchers who “serve as catalysts for the necessary empowering

For researchers with emancipatory aspirations, doing empirical work offers a
powerful opportunity for praxis to the extent that it enables people to change
by encouraging self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their particular
situations. (Lather, 1991: 56)

For me, the kind of critical research I am involved in “means moving outside the assumptions
and practices of the existing order. It is a struggle … (to make) categories, assumptions, and
practices of everyday life … problematic” (Popkewitz, 1987: 350). As a result, my line of inquiry
and analysis throughout has been tailored to serve my political purpose, and I maintain
recognition of this fact. My motivations have therefore been politically charged, affecting each
and every stage of knowledge production—from the creation of data collection tools right
through to the style of questioning I implemented during semi-structured interviews, the nature and purpose of my observations, and the currency I placed on data when selecting which information to use or discard during analysis. Schram (2003) points out—with regards to the political aspect of critical research—that we must not forget: “The values of the researcher inevitably influence the inquiry as he or she foregrounds the judgement call that an injustice is holding back someone from something better” (Schram, 2003: 35), and reminds us that because of this it is imperative for critical researchers to make their own contexts and political motivations explicit to the reader. I feel that I have made an attempt to make such details of my context obvious throughout this dissertation, designing my research narrative to be both self-conscious and self-reflexive, and aware of its latent subjectivity.

2 - The Foucauldian influence: Subjectivity and Discourse

Methodologically this study is deeply informed by the interpretive analytics of Foucault, in particular his theories on subjectivity and discourse—two concepts that are intrinsically linked and inseparable, because “for Foucault subjects are always discussed in terms of their discursive positions—as constructed objects in discursive fields” (Martino 1993: 132-133); and “discursive formations name, define, circumscribe various objects, concepts and theories, as well as making available “positions” for subjects” (Martino 1993: 132). Hence, a Foucauldian-influenced study of subjectivity will be unavoidably linked to discourse analysis, as subjectivity is a product of multiple discourses and the subject positions that these ‘orders of discourses’ make available.

In Foucauldian terms, discourse can be defined as “a particular way of thinking about the world which is shaped by socio-linguistic and cultural practices. Consequently, it is also a particular way
of writing and speaking, a system of rules and norms which organises our perception of the world and serves as the basis for our thinking about “reality”’’ (Martino 1993: 125). Discourse can also be viewed as active ‘systems of language’ that allow us to make sense of the world and shape “our understanding of ourselves; and our capacity to distinguish the valuable from the valueless, the true from the false, and the right from the wrong” (Danaher et al., 2000: 31). The discourses of various fields—such as education, media, politics and law—generate ‘statements of truth’ that help define our daily realities by positioning us to assume certain subjectivities that are congruent with the ‘truth of the times’. As such, discourses “offer the individual a range of models of subjectivity” (Weedon, 1987: 35), yet it is important to note that such models can empower or disempower, depending on whether individuals choose to—or are actually able to—conform to the ‘rules’ of the discourse. For example, it could be said that popular media discourse currently produces the knowledge that fat unhealthy individuals are undesirable and that they are socially excluded—manifest in television shows such as The Biggest Loser that ‘teach’ us how to stay away from such dangerous border spaces of society. Participants in The Biggest Loser learn how to re-enter ‘normal’ society by forging more acceptable and desirable body forms. A Foucauldian scholar would argue that such a television show positions its viewers to appropriate certain ‘truths’ about body weight and image—in turn, shaping viewers’ understandings of the world, and informing their subjectivities in ways that may have broader impacts on society. Either way, the construction of knowledge regarding current ‘truths’ of body weight and image is the product of discursive practice.

As discursive practice is seen to create truth and knowledge in such a way, Foucauldian theory understandably purports the view that “without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand our reality, our experiences, or ourselves” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 2). Furthermore, the production of any reality or truth is viewed as
entirely historically, socially, culturally and politically specific, due to the fact that discourses can and will change throughout time and context. Foucault (1970) explains this in *The Order of Things* in which he argues that throughout historical periods different ‘epistemes’ have existed that have each contained various discourses and ‘games of truth’ specific to that juncture. ‘Epistemes’ can be defined as “periods of history, organised around, and explicable in terms of, specific world-views and discourses” (Danaher et al., 2000: 29). Therefore, the various ‘truths’ and resulting subjectivities that discursive practice creates at any one time are by no means fixed and are subject to change at any time. Proof of this malleability of discourses can be found in the fact that throughout history remarkably wide-ranging ‘public truths’ have existed regarding various ‘controversial’ topics such as homosexuality and municipal punishment, and at each stage of history public discourse has produced subjects of marked contrast in relation to these topics. These ‘truths’ created by public discourse influence the way people act and the physical actions that are considered proper or otherwise at any one time. Foucault (1977) demonstrates this clearly in *Discipline and Punish* through his detailed account of the brutal public torture and execution of the French soldier Robert François Damiens who attempted to murder King Louis XV. Even though Damiens was slowly torn into pieces in front of a large audience—an act that we may now view as barbaric—“the punishment had its logic or rationale” (Danaher et al., 2000: 69) at the time and was therefore condoned.

Foucauldian theory, therefore, promotes a consistent view of subjectivities as socially, culturally and historically constituted within multiple discursive frameworks. As a result, rather than viewing humans as free or natural, they are considered ‘subjects’ who are “products of discourses and power relations, and take on different characteristics according to the range of subject positions that are possible in our socio-historical context” (Danaher et al., 2000: 118). These concepts have a major bearing on my methodological position, due to the fact that inherent
within this view is the assumption that subjectivities—like the discourses that inform them—are far from being fixed and absolute. Rather, subjectivities are sites of potential transformative change. Foucault (1972) writes that such change is most definitely possible, and argues that society must “promote new forms of subjectivity” (Foucault, 1972: 216) in order to liberate us from various forms of individualization and normalization that shape our subjectivities. My belief in the emancipatory potential of my research now becomes clear, given that I believe the subjectivities of youth can be ‘transformed’ or re-imagined. Specifically, I argue that such transformation can occur as the result of engaging young people in the critical and purposeful analysis of the ways that they are positioned by the ideologies of corporate-driven popular culture texts. For this to occur I argue that teachers must deconstruct the limiting and defining discourses of popular culture, and highlight for students the ways in which these texts inadvertently pride the interests of particular groups, silence and marginalize the interests of others, and limit “the possibilities for meaning making” (Martino 1993: 126-127). Given that Foucauldian theory views discourse as inseparable from language—and that texts therefore play a major part in formation of subjectivities and the structuring of power relations and representations within society—it also becomes clear why I believe that subject English is such a suitable site for the critically empowering analysis of these influences.

Furthermore, given the inseparability of discourse, subjectivity and language, it becomes clear why my research has been methodologically informed by a ‘discourse analysis’ approach. Discourse analysis exists on the assumption that “texts are not meaningful individually; it is only through their interconnection with other texts, the different discourses on which they draw, and the nature of their production, dissemination, and consumption that they are made meaningful” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 4). Therefore, discourse analysis is explicitly concerned with investigating the ways in which texts are made meaningful through discursive practices and also
how they contribute to the “constitution of social reality by making meaning” (Phillips and Hardy, 2002: 4). Whilst I am cautious not to view discourse analysis as a standalone ‘tool’ which researchers can use in the process of investigation (See Fairclough, 2001; in Wodak & Meyer, 2001: 121), I do believe that the praxis of discourse analysis has informed the lens through which I have investigated the complex interplay between the latent discourses of corporate-driven popular culture texts, the subjectivities of youth, and the English classroom—a process that has involved an in-depth analysis of the various subject positions and ‘truths’ that these discourses produce and a critique into the implications of such production. In doing so, I have used discourse analysis to examine “the social context in which language is used and how it pertains to the regulation and structuring of power relations” (Martino 1993: 123). I have deliberately critiqued and problematized the implications of youth subjectivities that are increasingly informed by the discourses of corporate-driven popular culture texts, and produced knowledge that suggests these subjectivities help reinforce problematic hierarchal social structures that promote normalizing and exclusionary practice in the everyday lives young people. In doing so, I have highlighted some of the ways that meaning is created and regulated within these discursive systems, and highlighted the possibilities of “moving beyond oppressive meaning making systems to make available alternative and multiple meanings” (Martino, 1993: 134). Discourse analysis also informs my methodology in terms of the ways that I have negotiated and analyzed my own practice as a researcher. I believe that when a researcher adopts a discourse analysis approach, they are bound to an examination of their own ideological position and the discourses that entangle their everyday practice—from the epistemology they bring to research, to the final stages of data analysis, presentation and reflection. Researchers informed by a discourse analysis approach “need to be conscious of the fact that there is no neutral position or stance available to them and that their actions and language are governed by their positions in a network of intersecting discourses” (Martino 1993: 134 – 135). I feel that in explicating as clearly as possible
my methodological influences and interpretative framework, structuring this paper as an emerging autoethnographic narrative, and writing in a self-reflexive style throughout, I have suitably accounted for my position as a subject within multiple discursive fields and acknowledged the subjectivity of my research text.

3 - Explicating the use of autoethnography as a methodological tool

Aspects of autoethnography methodologically inform the overarching meta-narrative that guides the course of this dissertation. These are manifest in the punctuating personal narratives that I have created in the hope of illuminating for the reader my own journey of self-realization and fundamental self re-evaluation I have traveled during the production of this research text. These narratives are not only crucial to the style, shape and purpose of this dissertation; they also provide rich signposts for the reader as to my particular location in relation to the subject matter—providing clues as to my paradigmatic influences, personal politics and history as subject.

Patton (2002) defines Autoethnography in the following way:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and the cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (Patton, 2002: 85)
Patton (2002) has been crucial in shaping my understanding of the form and his analysis of the tradition guides my use of it in major ways. I am particularly fond of Patton’s description of the autoethnographer as one who exposes a vulnerable self, displays multiple layers of consciousness and who uses their own story to help frame wider social and cultural issues—all of which I feel I have deployed in this research text. Autoethnography also opens up the possibilities for researchers to use their “own experiences and introspections as a primary data source” (Patton, 2002: 85) and position themselves as the subject of their own research (Lather, 1991); both of which I find exciting, due to the fact that during the initial stages of preparing ideas for this dissertation I did not consider such options to be acceptable as part of ‘valid’ academic discourse. Autoethnography allows ‘my story’ to be incorporated as a methodological tool, and as a result I believe that richer and more relevant insights are made possible.

In retrospect, I realize that if I had denied myself a place in the research narrative, then I would have been doing this dissertation an incredible disservice. The narrative of my history with popular culture and my deep self-analysis in light of its influence is intrinsically linked to the subject matter of this dissertation. Furthermore, my emergence as a more empowered subject as the result of subjecting myself to rigorous personal deconstruction is analogous of the process I argue teachers can start to inspire in young people. I have purposely designed these narratives to offer real-life examples that illuminate—in a far less protracted manner—the more formal academic content of this dissertation. I am unable to be removed from every word used and every meaning produced in this dissertation, and autoethnography helps to validate and draw attention to this fact.
Furthermore, I also understand that my decision to adopt autoethnography as a methodological influence will not necessarily be received by all academics with open arms, and that a core of anti-autoethnography critique exists. Crotty (1998) writes of this opposition, noting that such personal writing is controversial among qualitative theorists because of its “rampant subjectivism” (Crotty 1998: 48). It also seems that many academics object to the way the form “blurs the lines between social science and literary writing” (Patton 2002: 86). Although I acknowledge the obvious subjectivity of a personal narrative such as my own, I also defend my use of the form—mainly because I simply refuse to believe that a textual construction of any nature can somehow exist outside of subjective discourse. I believe that every research text tells a story, irrespective of whether personal narratives are deployed or not, and as a researcher who is informed by constructivist epistemology I also believe that there is no meta-discourse—hence, all texts are incapable of discarding the deep-seated political, social and cultural contexts that produced them. Once again, context is all. Autoethnography is one of the few methodological styles that allow researchers to actively uncover their contextual influences and validate their own experiences as integral aspects of the research process; positioning themselves as a major point of analysis yet understanding at the same time that all data is contextually constructed and will be subjectively understood. My decision to use Autoethnography is far from ego-driven, but rather a tool for the clarification of meaning that I believe will assist the reader’s understanding of where I am positioned in the scheme of knowledge production, and that will demonstrate how my position is relevant to and works with the issues, theories and issues presented. In turn, this may allow the reader to make a more considered judgment regarding the effectiveness of the final research product. Surely such an approach is more objective than one that refuses to acknowledge the details of its own production?
Methodologically this study is informed by a commitment to position the student voice as a prime analytical tool—‘giving voice’ to young people regarding their intrinsic involvement with the research topics under investigation. In adopting this approach I am subscribing to “an exploratory research process that involves a politics of commitment to hearing the voices of students which are often silenced in schools” (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005: 7). As a result, qualitative data spawning from the in-depth case study interviews features heavily within the data analysis chapter.

In my view, studies that put into operation the voices of young people are few and far between, and this suggests that young people are too often silenced in the same continuing debates in which they are the key subjects of analysis. Therefore, scholarly discourse frequently and paradoxically ignores the student voice, even in studies that position students as central loci of concern. As a result I believe there is an over-saturated market of intellectual opinion and theory, accompanied by a lack of empirical evidence in support. Finding empirical data spawning from school-based research—especially with regards to young people’s involvement with issues such as popular culture, subjectivity, English and critical literacy—was an arduous task to say the least.

This methodological position I have assumed is also informed by a personal belief that in the ‘adult world’ of teachers, researchers (who do not validate student experiences) and policy-makers in which we live, young people are often ill-diagnosed, misreported, harshly regulated, and too-often regarded with an overly suspicious eye. Therefore, I feel that public truths regarding young people and their opinions are habitually filtered and processed through various adult discourses such as media, education, law and family life. As Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) write, students are subjected to “adult-centric structures and processes within a system which often does
not acknowledge and even disregards their voices” (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005: 12). As a result, I feel it is of utmost importance to validate the voices of young people in order to investigate what is going on at the ‘grass-roots’ level. In line with the opinions of Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005), I feel this endeavour can also provide insights into “students’ feelings of power, powerlessness and resistance both with regard to . . . education and educational authority . . . and their positioning within a pecking order of peer group social relations involving what it means to be ‘normal’” (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005: 12).

In my mind, it would have been ludicrous for me to silence the student voice in any way, given that a major thread of my argument throughout this dissertation is that the experiences of youth are already being silenced and disenfranchised at an alarming frequency. Hence, my theoretical and methodological perspective regarding young people is that they are ‘where it’s at’ in terms of generating rich, insightful and worthwhile data in this area of study. Students are on the frontline concerning my subject matter, immersed in popular culture texts to a huge extent daily, and they also engaged in the compulsory study of subject English. It would have been frivolous and irresponsible to not give the student voice pole-position in this research text.

Nevertheless, I also understand that positioning the student voice as central to a study is not “entirely unproblematic and that researchers are implicated in a set of power relations that involve the authorisation of particular realities” (Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005: 6). In addition, I understand that no neutral position is available to either the participants or myself, and that any attempt to analyze the intent of the participants will be fraught with contextually specific bias and enmeshed in a variety of intersecting discourses (See Martino 1993: 134). As a result, in line with my Foucauldian-influenced theoretical perspective, I have tried at all times throughout data analysis to closely analyze the social context in which the language of both myself and my
participants has been used—including a recognition and analysis of the complex interplay of language between the two. In doing so, I believe I have clarified for the reader how such language pertains to the regulation and structuring of power relations.

Part Two - Methods: Data collection and analysis

Justifying the sample

This study involved a group of thirty year 11 students at a multi-ethnic inner suburban coeducational government high school in Perth, Western Australia. All thirty of these students completed the quantitative survey and five students from within this broader sample formed the case-study sample group who completed in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews.

As this dissertation is interested in youth subjectivity and subject English, a school has been chosen as the site of data collection, and teenagers as the participants. This has allowed access to subjects who were able to provide rich and relevant data in support of my arguments. The participation of young people has been indispensable and this research project could not have effectively materialized without their involvement.

The sample size was informed by principles of ‘purposeful sampling’—choosing a small number of information rich subjects which illuminated the questions under study and which provided thick, rich and descriptive data. Implicit in my methodology is an understanding that:
… the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researchers than with sample size. (Patton 2002: 245)

Decisions regarding my sample size were also of a pragmatic nature. For example, it was easier to conduct a quantitative survey within the controlled context of a classroom, so I made the decision to use one of my own Media Studies classes as the sample group. This decision made it a lot easier to achieve the ethical requirements of research such as issuing permission and consent forms, disclosing the nature of the study to the group, and the actual practice of survey implementation. Using my own class meant that I had on-going and direct access to the sample and also made for a more pleasant research process due to the fact that I had already established positive relationships with the students prior to data collection. Students undertook the survey voluntarily and with the permission of their parent/s or legal guardian/s. Students were informed prior to survey implementation—verbally and through consent forms—of the voluntary nature of their participation and that there would be no negative repercussions for non-participating students. Of my thirty-two-student class, two did not participate—one was absent for several weeks during the process, and the other chose not to participate—hence, a thirty-student total sample.

It is also important to note that whilst student opinion regarding subject English was a major aspect of this research, it was a purposeful decision on my part not to use an English class as the sample group. This decision is grounded in my belief that isolating data collection to one English class in particular would have been detrimental to its quality, mainly due to the fact that it would have limited the kinds of participants in terms of their experiences studying the subject. Such limitations would have occurred not only because the same English teacher would have instructed
all students, but students would have also all been enrolled in the same English unit. In Western Australia, every student enrolled in post-compulsory education is required to study English, and at the school in which my research took place, four units of English were available. Two of these (English and English Literature) were TEE (Tertiary Entrance Qualification) subjects that are considered to be of a higher academic rigour; and the other two (Vocational English and Senior English) were non-TEE options and are consequently considered less academically meritorious.

The benefit of using my particular sample was that whilst they all studied English, they did so at varying academic levels and as a result they reflected much broader experiences. I asked students to indicate on the survey whether or not they currently studied TEE or non-TEE English subjects, and the resulting split was very even:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEE English Students</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-TEE English Students</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig.1 - Split between TEE and non-TEE students who completed the quantitative survey.

If I had chosen to merely isolate a TEE or non-TEE English class as the sample pool, then the results would have reflected a narrower variety of opinions, abilities, backgrounds and personal histories concerning subject English. In addition, another benefit of my sample not being an English class was that students were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on the subject from outside the context of English itself. I feel that because of this, students may have been able to think more objectively about the subject—free from the gaze of their English teacher.
The decision to use a five-student case-study sample for the purpose of the semi-structured qualitative interviews was also informed by ‘purposeful sampling’ theory and the desire to gather data from a small information-rich group of participants. The specific choice of ‘five’ students as opposed to any other number was in many ways pragmatic, determined by resources, time available to conduct interviews, and the nature of the MEd dissertation formula which binds the student researcher to certain rules and regulations regarding dissertation length and form. In accordance with ethical requirements regarding students’ anonymity, the five students were ‘chosen’ in a most democratic manner. Firstly, the thirty survey participants were asked to indicate (on the quantitative survey) their interest in partaking in follow-up interviews—which gathered twenty-three interested students in sum. Then, a few weeks later, I simply wrote the twenty-three names on pieces of paper, placed the names in a hat and had a colleague draw out five at random. I then approached these five students one-by-one, reconfirmed their interest and issued further permission slips and consent forms regarding the interviews. This entire process was as discreet as possible at all times and was also very efficient.

Data Collection Methods - An overview

In deciding upon the kinds of data collection and analysis methods to use in this research, I realized that it was imperative to consider my aforementioned theoretical framework, key methodological influences, and my overarching epistemology in order to conceptualize the relationship between these elements and the types of methods best suited to gathering information most conducive to the goals of my project. As a result of such consideration, I believe I have strengthened my reasons for selecting the methods implemented in this study.
Crotty (1998) presents a 4-tier allegory that explicates the interrelationship between the ‘four elements’ of one’s research—epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods—and in doing so situates ‘methods’ as the by-product of the former elements. Crotty’s allegory highlights the ways that the four elements are intrinsically connected and explains how they each have a major bearing on the final research product. For illustrative purposes, I have replicated Crotty’s allegory below (Fig. 2):

![Crotty's 4-Tier Allegory](image-url)

The double arrows of this allegory demonstrate the concept that whilst it is important to distinguish between these four elements and acknowledge their singular presence in the context of research (Crotty, 1998: 3), it must also be understood that a fluidity exists between them. In other words, influence moves back and forth between each level, informing each in various ways.
After considering these four elements in such a way, I eventually decided upon a mixed-methods approach (Patton, 2002: 247) and adopted a triangulated data collection strategy that combined the use of a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews and observations in order to collect the most rich and relevant data possible. I believe that the methods I eventually chose are congruent with the motivations and interests of my methodological and theoretical position.

The ‘triangulation of methods’ I have chosen is described by Patton as a process of “using several kinds of methods or data, including using both quantitative and qualitative approaches” (Patton 2002: 247). Lather (1991) writes that triangulation involving multiple data sources and methods “is critical in establishing a data trustworthiness” (Lather, 1991: 66), given that one of the key benefits of this approach is that if one method leaves a hole or unexplained gap in the fabric of data, another method will often provide the relevant answer—visa versa. The specific model of triangulation I have utilized—incorporating a survey, semi-structured interviews, and observations—can be illustrated in the following way:

Fig. 3 - A Triangulation of Methods.
The survey constituted the first stage of data collection and was conducted during a one-hour lesson with the thirty participating students. The survey was organized into three parts, in congruence with each of the three levels of synthesized information that this dissertation is concerned with analyzing (See Appendix 1). Therefore, the first section investigated the textual consumption patterns of students, the second investigated the influence that corporate-driven popular culture texts have on the subjectivities and everyday social experiences of the students, and the third section dealt specifically with investigating the students’ opinions regarding their experiences studying popular culture in English. As a result of organizing the survey in this fashion, I was provided with quantitative evidence to help support each level of my argument. The structure and design of the survey is covered in more detail within the Data Analysis chapter.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with the five case-study participants provided crucial, rich and detailed data. These interviews were conducted six weeks after the survey, upon compilation and preliminary analysis of survey data. The interviews served somewhat of a reconnaissance purpose, allowing me to elicit further clarification and elaboration regarding key concepts and trends that arose as a result of analyzing the quantitative data. The interviews also allowed me to tease out further information from the participants regarding concepts that were of particular interest to the study, yet for which it was hard to gain suitable data merely through the quantitative survey—such as the relationship between subcultures and branding, or topics such as peer pressure within social groups and student opinion regarding their English teachers. The interviews allowed my commitment to the ‘student voice’ to be mobilized and posited as a central analytical concern, and uncovered detailed personalized data in terms of the three levels of information analyzed in this dissertation. Every attempt was made to provide the participating case-study students with comfortable spaces from which they could voice their opinions, and the
resulting data was indispensable in terms of investigating how young people consume, use and engage with popular culture texts both in and out of school.

Finally, as an informed social observer (Patton, 2002: 5), I chose to validate my own observations as an important data collection method, and throughout the course of this dissertation these observations feature with some regularity. These include observations of…

- Participating case-study students, both in and out of interviews.
- The entire thirty-student sample, from the perspective of a teacher/researcher.
- Young people in general within society (mainly for comparative reasons).
- Teachers: in terms of colleagues I have worked with and observed, colleagues I have spoken to regarding the research, and teachers that have taught me previously.
- Society (broadly): regarding topics related to and of concern to the dissertation.
- Popular culture: in society, specific text examples and general topics of popular culture that are related to and of concern to the dissertation.
- Myself: as a teacher, researcher, ex-teenager, adult, and as a subject/site of critical deconstruction.

Whilst observations do not hold nearly as much precedence as the latter two methods, they do contribute in significant ways to the fabric and style of this dissertation. I have used observations as a qualitative method to offer punctuating additional and relevant commentary when required throughout the data analysis chapter in particular, and in other relevant areas. Due to my acquired writing style, my keen observing eye, my use of autoethnography as a methodological tool, and my own close relationship with the students and subject matter, I decided early in the scheme of
research production that I could simply not produce a research text that was without the element of my own observations and reflections.

In retrospect, I feel validated by my decision to use a triangulated mixed-methods approach. During the course of data collection I have also learnt that both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods have latent positives and negatives and a mixed-methods approach provides for a more rounded and valid perspective. For example, whilst the quantitative survey data served to offer an interesting overview of trends and could be suitably graphed, it was also impersonal and in some ways I feel it did not always reflect an accurate portrait—as I will later discuss during Data Analysis. On the other hand, whilst the qualitative data was rich and offered some piercing insights into the everyday realities of the students, it was undoubtedly more subjective.

Data Analysis

Data was compiled and analyzed in three stages. Firstly, the quantitative survey data was totaled and after some consideration, presented in graph form. Graphs were chosen to allow for an easy-to-read format and because they serve as effective tools for comparison. Secondly, qualitative data was compiled by transcribing the interviews with the case study students (who were each given a same-sex alias in congruence with confidentiality and ethical procedure). This interview data was then analyzed by highlighting and locating recurring or significant themes that arose, and by organizing these themes in congruence with the three-part structure of the dissertation. Finally, key moments of analysis took place during the process of compiling and shaping the data analysis chapter, during which I had to consider the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative data, and also during which stage I began adding to the chapter many of the observations I had
compiled throughout the research process. Some of these observations had been documented at the time of data collection and others were made in retrospect upon considering data further.

This entire analytical process was informed by ‘discourse analysis’ theory as a methodological approach, and heavily influenced by my commitment to critical research. As such, I was required as a researcher to “pay close attention to the social context in which language is used and how it pertains to the regulation and structuring of power relations” (Martino 1993: 123). I was also required to analyze data in terms of “the discursive patterns of meaning and the contradictions that can be detected and how these can be accounted for in terms of identifying the specific discourses which have regulated the production of such meanings” (Martino 1993: 123-124).

Hence, a purposeful attempt was made to analyze the gaps and silences within the data—for example, what was not said by interview participants—in an attempt to infer relevant meaning from such omissions.

Throughout this analytical process of writing and knowledge production, I also attempted to explicate my own position and context at all times, in turn presenting highly self-reflexive data. I am highly concerned as a scholar of critical research to avoid producing data that fails to acknowledge the context of its own production. This commitment is congruent with the strong Foucauldian influence on my methodology which translates into a purposeful attempt to explore, unpack, problematize and critique the discursive patterns of data, understanding these patterns as socially, historically and culturally produced. I also understand that any meanings I create or infer as a result of data analysis are also intrinsically bound to discourses available in the context in which this research work has been produced.

Data analysis has also been informed by my methodological decision to posit the student voice as a prime data collection and analysis strategy, and as a result I have tried to centralize the student voice in the data analysis chapter. In preparation for this dissertation, I canvassed a lot of research
that presented student quotes as small decontextualized pieces of text or did not present student data at all, and I have tried to avoid this. In fact, I have attempted to provide signposts for the reader at times when I have felt further information is needed, by accompanying student quotes with information that serves to better illuminate the context in which students have made particular comments.

Throughout these three stages of analysis and the process of thematically bracketing data into the three major areas of research concern, I realize that I was involved in a highly selective editing process, whereby I made a range of authorial value judgments and prided the currency of certain data in order to suit my argument. In doing so, I have not only discarded significant amounts of ‘unrelated’ data, but I have also positioned the reader to assume a perspective similar to my own, through choosing piercing insights that illuminate and serve my research purpose, and through organizing the data to suit the narrative of my own design. Such an approach is congruent with the general aims of data analysis in critical research, where data often “becomes a medium where a narrative is created, and interpreted, rather than being a true representative of the participants” (Collins, 2003: 64)—which is quite a different approach to that of ‘traditional’ research. Even though I acknowledge this, I do not mean to suggest that I have silenced any contradicting evidence or merely ignored data that does not immediately support my cause. In fact, where possible, I have located and analyzed related contradictory data as a means of providing a critical perspective and in some cases I have problematized my own arguments where I feel such interruption is required. In some ways the contradictory data has led to some very significant discoveries, offering new pathways to be explored and alternative view points that are just as valid and rich in possibility. Overall, I believe I have actively embraced and considered such conflicting data, and in doing so I feel I have strengthened my own argument significantly.
Finally, I have made an effort throughout the presentation of data analysis not to silence my own subjective voice as the key producer of knowledge in this research context, as I feel researchers who do so silence their best artillery in the argumentative battlefield. This perspective is in line with the work of Lather (1991a) who regards the trustworthiness and data analysis of critical research as a purposely-subjective process, positioning the researcher I as a major point of analysis, and understanding that all data is contextually constructed and subjectively understood. Lather’s argument for this kind of self-reflexivity debunks the concept of ‘objectivity’ as naïve, when she writes that: “Past efforts to leave subjective, tactic knowledge out of the “context of verification” are seen by postpositivists as “naive empiricism” . . . Our best tactic at present is to construct research designs that demand a rigorous self-reflexivity” (Lather, 1991a: 66).
Narrative 3 - The dislocated teacher.

When I was a 14-year-old punk, engorged on a rocket-fuelled helping of misguided anarchist ideologies, I was of the unremarkable opinion that all teachers were morons; and if someone had suggested that I would go on to become a teacher myself I would have scoffed in their face.

13 years later, one would naturally assume that my conception of the school system has radically altered, and that such previously indomitable levels of abhorrence have been suitably doused. Sadly, whilst such an assumption is valid in some ways, it is discernibly flawed in many others.

Whilst I have learnt to appreciate the intrinsic value of education, forged a fundamentally inspiring belief in the emancipatory potential of critical practice, and developed lifelong friendships with colleagues of tremendous inspiration and worth, my opinion of many educators regrettably remains sceptical at best.

In short, the range and quality of teachers I have worked with is extreme, and the practical boundaries that authorize the role of a ‘teacher’ are also markedly broad.

It is very hard, I have found, to be a young teacher in school contexts where one is outnumbered by a ‘parent generation’ of colleagues. In many cases it seems that the teachers who currently inform the pedagogical direction of subject departments are the same who effectively silenced my own beliefs when I was a teenager. Furthermore, it is problematic to be of a developing intellect in a system where mediocrity is too often the status quo.
In more ways than one—and despite my growing knowledge of pedagogical theory and research—it seems I am still often treated like the angsty punk teenager I was in 1994. At times, intelligence seems no more useful than scrawled punk lyrics on a toilet wall. I have been talked down to by colleagues, silenced for displaying any semblance of leftist or critical opinion regarding subject issues, and at times I have felt relegated to a nowhere zone—caught in painful dislocation between the 15-year-olds I teach and the ‘adults’ with whom I engage professionally.

Schools are indeed, very difficult places.

After my time in London, I returned to Perth in late-2004 and ended up doing some relief work at my own high school. Re-tracing the halls and quadrangles of an institution I found so difficult to negotiate a decade earlier was ethereal and haunting; yet the structure of the building itself was not what caused me most dismay. You see, I was expecting theoretical change of some sort, in the fabric of the school. I was expecting to see fresh faces, new books, revamped classrooms, and an atmosphere to reflect the changing nature of an entirely new generation of youth. I was in all respects utterly disappointed. The same dusty books remained, the same posters clung desperately to the walls of my old English classroom, and a worksheet I was required to give a year-10 English class was, in fact, all too familiar. I did the same one in 1994.

On my first day of relief, I was walking towards the allocated classroom for first period when I heard a teacher yell fiercely at a student, asking the student to come to him immediately. The student had obviously not done as required, as the teacher continued to yell. When I turned to see what was the matter I realized the teacher was not yelling at a student at all, he was yelling at me! In horror, I realized it was in fact my year 9 Geography teacher, whose finger was outstretched towards me, like a mad infected leper. Surely he had emerged from a time capsule,
or had been cryogenically frozen and thawed back to life in front of my very eyes? The same faded blue *GloMesh* shirt, the same handlebar moustache. It was 1993 again, in almost every sense. Confused, I approached this reputedly disgusting man, who would soon indubitably realize I was a teacher, not a student, and apologize. Or maybe not.

“Where is your uniform?” barked the beast.

“Excuse me?” I replied, flabbergasted.

At this point he faltered. I was too confident for a student. I was only *slightly* terrified of him.

“I’m a relief teacher at this school,” I said.

There was a considerable pause.

“Oh, well then…” he replied gruffly. “Then you better get a visitors pass or sum’pin, coz’ someone’s gunna think you’re a student n’ you’ll get taken to the deputies office.”

At this last remark he laughed and went on his way.

Was it the fact that I wasn’t wearing a tie? I wasn’t middle-aged? I wasn’t wearing socks pulled up to my knees? I wasn’t a known dinosaur around the school grounds?

I guess when you’re over 60, anyone under thirty looks like one of your year 12 students, so surely that gives you the right to treat them in such a deplorable manner? Well… no, not really. The simple fact that educators of this nature—who are so wholly removed from the fabric of a morally and ethically correct society—persist to abound and have been entitled to maintain a career whilst displaying such behaviour, points to a dire concern for schools all over. Yet sadly, situations such as this blood-boiling example are not rare, and in fact I have encountered a range of ludicrous and embarrassing events of this sort many times before and since. If young and creative teachers are treated in this manner, is it so surprising that *students* feel increasing isolated in schools?
Overall, returning to my old school highlighted two major problems. Firstly, the teachers had not changed—they had just gotten older. Secondly, the pedagogical practices had not changed—they had just continued to be rehashed year-in-year-out by the same teachers, over and over again. Unfathomable cultural, economic, social and political change that had occurred outside the school gates over the previous decade apparently bore no influence whatsoever on the nature of learning experiences for the young people inside. The school itself, just like my poor old Geography teacher, was wholly removed from the broader context of living. Year 10 English students—who were into MySpace, PS2, MSN instant messaging, LAN-gaming, cable-speed Internet file sharing, The OC, and downloadable media—were still in rigid rows being forced to read the same browned books and dull functional grammar worksheets that had turned me against schooling so vehemently years before. I was appalled, disturbed, angry, yet remarkably unsurprised.

At the end of the day, it’s all the more fuel to fire the debate that schools are losing touch with the everyday experiences of youth. If schools such as my own have showed little pedagogical advancement in 20 years, then it’s not surprising that this divide continues to grow. As a teenager, the inability for me to draw consistent and meaningful links between the contrasting adult and teenage social spaces I regularly inhabited was essentially the cause of many unnecessary ills in my life. The currency and so-called ethics and morals of the “real” adult world were so sharply opposed by the appealing messages rampant within the popular culture material I consumed, so as a result I clung to subcultural identity as a way of demarcating myself from that which I could not comprehend.
The realization of this fact became clear to me as a pre-service teacher, not long after I commenced my DipEd study in 2000. Therefore, it became a crusade of mine to address this issue in my own teaching. Equipped with lofty ideals, an explicit commitment to critical literacy and all sorts of other recent pedagogical artillery, I expected to initiate immediate change in the lives of my students whom I planned to miraculously transform from cultural dupes to empowered postmodern thinkers. This naivety, however, was soon to be shattered. Sure, I managed to assume the role of a reasonably innovative young teacher, and I tried at all times possible to validate the everyday experiences of my students in class. What’s more, I probably did manage to instil some kind of critical-consciousness in the minds of many students, however, it was soon to become harder than I had previously imagined. Not because I wasn’t capable, but rather because in some cases, I simply wasn’t allowed to enact critical practice!

A range of problems emerged.

As an English teacher I accepted that I would encounter many colleagues who were steeped in the traditional approaches of cultural heritage pedagogies, and I did with ferocity; yet the kinds of problems I soon experienced were often at a departmental level. I encountered many colleagues who were suspicious of popular culture in the classroom and as a result they colluded against me in a manner that mobilized department-wide unrest. For example, my first ever Head of Department was informed by a member of staff that I was using hip-hop lyrics to assist in a poetry unit, and as a result I was asked not to do that, because it wasn’t fair on the other classes who just had to study the normal texts. I was then held to account during a departmental meeting by a group of three colleagues who wanted to publicly discuss why they heard an Eminem video clip playing in my class when they walked by. The truth is, we were analyzing the versions of masculinity made available to boys and men in the video clip, which for many students in the class was an extremely challenging and confronting exercise. Yet, my colleagues implied that I
simply must have been cavorting somehow, and deviating from the curriculum to simply pleasure and impress my students. I was, after all very young for a teacher, so I was probably letting the students run the show. When I explained to my colleagues that the exercise was intrinsically linked to analyzing the masculine stereotype of a character in the novel we were studying, I thought they might understand. Some colleagues did, gratefully, however, the colluding group simply failed to accept that this could be a plausible learning strategy, and an argument ensued.

Three days later, my Head of Department was sorry to inform me that from that point on it would be best if I checked with her before using any media texts such as music in the classroom; the argument being that I was upsetting fellow staff. After some personal demons to fight and a whole lot of resentment, I relented. Humorously, I then sat through a term of department meetings where the same “upset” staff would rant about “the insolence of youth”, and the ever-decreasing levels of student cultural and literary respect and interest—kids these days just don’t want to work, kids these days just don’t care anymore, kids these days just want to sit around and watch TV, listen to their iPods and play video games. You’ve heard it all before, I’m sure.

Before entering the school system as an adult and an educator, I never really thought about the fact that I may be forced to reproduce its deeply institutionalized values, and in many cases, in order to maintain my job and avoid rebuttal, I would have to assume the role of a conformist conservative subject. Maintaining one’s role as a critical educator, I have learnt, involves becoming an isolated or dislocated educator, constantly fighting against harmful hegemony. For many reasons this is deeply upsetting, and I have been close to resigning from the profession several times.

Educators, by their very nature, should be inspiring, critical, pervasive, and capable of planting the seeds of imagination and possibility in the minds of their students. In fact, they should be
everything my teachers were not. One would likely assume that such proactive change has occurred in the ten years since my schooling, but really, I assure you, in many schools it has not. I have had English teachers ask me what ‘critical literacy’ means, colleagues laugh at me and dismiss me as “fancy” for knowing what ‘critical literacy’ means, I have had whole groups of teachers isolate me for questioning or debating important issues at department meetings, and I have had concerned members of staff tell me not to “rock-the-boat, because this is a very conservative school”. Put simply, I have been happy and accepted in schools, only when I have submitted to treading the mediocre path, accepted the infinite wisdom of my aging superiors, and silenced my critical faculty in order to appear congruent with the conformist aims of the department or school.

Whether it is unfounded opposition to new critical ideas, or ludicrous and draconian attitudes inherent within old-school teaching discourse, there are many reasons why I have become a dislocated teacher.

Schools can be soul-destroying places, not just for the students.
Chapter 4 - Analyzing the data.

Data collected for this study presented in tremendous congruence to the over-arching polemic of my dissertation and provided illuminating evidence to support my three major areas of analysis. Consumption data suggested an overwhelming predominance of popular culture in the textual diets of the participants, my in-depth case study interviews reflected young individuals whose lives are influenced in major ways by the ideologies of popular media, and both the survey and interview data support my argument that the everyday popular culture driven experiences of youth are often silenced within subject English.

The combination of extremely vocal case-study participants and detailed survey data resulted in over seventy pages of transcribed data and over forty useable graphs by the end of collation. As a result, I have often found myself partaking in a tiresome analysis process—sifting through laborious mountains of data in order to ‘nut out’ the real essence of what students said, in order to give the reader a real sense for what was going on in the students’ lives.

My only gripe is that when compared to my pre-research data compiled in London, the Australian data is far less shocking and subversive, and requires more in depth consideration. I will never forget a 15-year-old female student in London who said quite bluntly: “We have to read girls’ magazines so that we can learn how to impress boys and so we know which brands of make-up can help us best”. A range of other comments to this effect were made by her peers, and I won’t deny that my specific politicized location in relation to the subject matter of this study had me hoping that I may uncover some similarly outlandish data once more. Instead of inhabiting positions that were totally devoid of media literacy, I found that my Australian students inhabited complicated and often contradictory worlds in which they displayed some sense of media literacy and a basic awareness of the ways they were positioned by corporate-
driven popular culture texts, yet at the same time they also displayed an equally powerful commitment to popular media, subculture, brand names and hegemonic stereotypes. At times the five case study participants spoke from the perspectives of critically aware young adults, only to revert in the blink of an eye to scathing attacks on their peers who were not in alliance with popular notions of coolness or acceptability.

Fortunately, my five case study students—Amy, Chris, Damon, Erica and Jade—were quite dissimilar in terms of their specific popular culture interests and influences, their subcultures and friendship groups, and their experiences with the study of popular culture texts in English. However, despite this variety of specific personalities, experiences and subcultures, obvious recurring themes still presented, and I will concentrate on exploring these major themes throughout this data analysis section.

Part One - Popular culture: student consumption trends

Section One of the quantitative survey completed by my thirty-student sample was principally concerned with gauging the frequency of my participants’ popular culture consumption, concerning eight different text forms: magazines, the Internet, music, movies, television, newspapers, books and video games. In the survey, students rated their text consumption on a five-increment sliding scale as follows:

Every Day - Every Second Day - A Few Times a Week - Every Few Weeks - Rarely

Students were asked to select the option they felt best suited their day-to-day consumption habits regarding each text. As the reader will note, I have collated this data in bar-graph form and
presented selected graphs for illustrative purposes throughout this chapter. Graphs include total values for each category for comparative purposes.

In analyzing the data, several consumption trends emerged that were of primary interest to this dissertation. Some of these trends were in line with recent empirical research discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), and some were not. Students displayed a heavy involvement with certain text forms, such as music, television and the Internet. Other text forms such as books, newspapers and magazines appeared to be less frequently consumed. Video games emerged as a popular form with male participants, yet extremely unpopular with females.

Text forms for which consumption occurs at a high frequency in the everyday lives of the students are of particular interest to this study, as it would seem apt to suggest that the ideologies and subject positions available within these texts are more influential than others. I have deemed ‘high frequency’ texts to be those with an obvious weighting towards the ‘Every Day’ or ‘Every Second Day’ consumption categories. In line with this design, I have deemed ‘low frequency’ texts to be those that displayed an obvious weighting towards the ‘Every Few Weeks’ or ‘Rarely’ consumption categories. Obviously, it would seem apt to suggest that the ideologies and subject positions available within the low frequency texts play a lesser role informing the subjectivities of the student participants.

1.1 - ‘High Frequency’ texts: Music, Television and the Internet

In line with my expectations, Music, Television and the Internet emerged as the most popular texts within the thirty-student sample. Whilst much of the literature I have reviewed suggests that Television is the prime popular culture influence of youth, my data suggests that Music is just as popular, and the Internet is not too far behind.
Regarding music, I have observed a rising prevalence in the student ownership of iPods and similar MP3 devices of late, and given the portability of these items and the speed at which music can now be globally accessed through stores such as iTunes, I believe that music is re-emerging as a major popular culture medium through which corporations can reach young people.

Graph 1 shows that twenty-six of the thirty-student sample indicated that they listened to music everyday. In retrospect, I believe it would have also been interesting to find out exactly how long these twenty-six students listen to music on average, as I feel that most students would probably listen for several hours or more each day.

Graph 1 - I listen to Music…

Television consumption data indicated a trend similar to Music. Twenty-five of the thirty students indicated that they watched television every day (see over - Graph 2). This data is in opposition to Quart (2003) who suggests that teens’ television watching has diminished over the last decade and that video games are replacing television as the most commonly consumed text form (Quart, 2003: 130). However, my data is congruent with the recent Kaiser Family Foundation study which argued that television still reigned supreme as a number one media source of exposure for teenagers (Schor, 2004: 158).
It is important to note that my television consumption data does not account for the high possibility that a large proportion of the twenty-five students who indicated that they watched television everyday are also likely to be involved in multi-tasking with other popular culture texts when watching (See Lafayette, 2003), which would increase their immersion in—and their overall daily consumption of—popular culture.

Graph 2 - I watch TV…

The Internet appeared as a significantly consumed popular culture text, as twenty of the thirty student sample indicated that they were on the Internet ‘Every Day’ or ‘Every Second Day’. Again, I am interested in retrospect to know on average how long these twenty students might spend on the Internet each time they log on, as I would assume that in most cases students do not simply log on for five minutes to check their emails. I believe that students more likely spend extended periods of time on the Internet for various reasons, such as ‘chatting’ on instant-messenger programs or communicating through net-blogs. In fact, I believe that post-data collection, student Internet usage within my thirty-student sample significantly increased, due to the net-blogging ‘MySpace Explosion’ that I will further discuss in Part Two of this chapter. As a result, whilst the following data in Graph 3 (see over) definitely suggests a strong involvement with online culture, it is my personal belief that students actually use the Internet more than this data suggests:
1.2 - Low Frequency texts: Books, Newspapers and Magazines

Unsurprisingly, text forms such as books, newspapers and even magazines lagged significantly in terms of consumption within my thirty-student sample. I must remind readers that ‘traditional’ text forms such as books are most often prided in cultural heritage models of English education—the same model that often considers newspapers and magazines to be ‘popular culture’. Eighteen of the thirty-student sample indicated they read newspapers ‘Every Few Weeks’ or ‘Rarely’ and twenty-two indicated they read books ‘Every Few Weeks’ or ‘Rarely’. Some readers may suggest that this provides all the more evidence for the need to study these ‘lacking’ text forms in English, and I am not necessarily arguing otherwise. I am, however, strongly suggesting that such text forms play little part informing the everyday experiences of teenagers. Graphs 4 and 5 (see over) show the consumption patterns for newspapers and books, respectively:
Magazine and movie texts have traditionally been considered ‘pop-culture’ texts to study in English and still feature heavily within critical literacy ‘how to’ literature, however, my data suggests that these texts do not feature heavily within the everyday realities of the thirty-student sample—especially when compared to interactive and high frequency media forms. This may come as a shock to English teachers who feel they are at the cutting edge of popular culture analysis when they branch into movie or magazine analysis.

Personally, I was surprised by the magazine consumption data, because when I was the same age as the students in my sample group—just a decade ago—magazines constituted a huge portion of my everyday popular culture consumption and held major currency within my social groups. Magazines were textual manifestations of important subcultural trends such as surfing, music,
and skateboarding, and it was common knowledge that girls would read magazines such as *Dolly* or *Girlfriend* on a regular basis. This was, of course, before the rise of widely available Internet access and before the online convergence of video, music and text.

The English departments in which I have worked have all treated magazines as a major text—if not the major text—of popular culture study in English, and I admit to having launched into the analysis of popular culture texts with my own students under the apparent false assumption that I was tapping into an area relevant to all of their lives. Zero of the thirty-student sample indicated that they read magazines ‘Every Day’, and twenty-five indicated they read magazines either ‘A Few Times a Week’, ‘Every Few Weeks’ or ‘Rarely’:

Graph 6 - I read **Magazines**….

![Graph 6](image)

In comparison, movies were consumed more often. Eleven of the thirty-student sample indicated that they watched movies ‘A Few Times a Week’ (see over - Graph 7), however, consumption patterns generally indicated that movie consumption leaned towards the lower end of the scale. It is important to remember that this data would obviously be influenced by the fact that to watch a movie takes an extended period of time and students are often too busy with school and casual work commitments to do this on a daily basis. It is far easier to surf the net, watch television or listen to music than it is to sit down and pay attention to a ninety-minute feature film.
Graph 7 - I watch Movies…

1.3 - Video Games: a gender-biased influence

The remaining consumption trend of note was the remarkably gender-biased consumption of video games. I had assumed prior to the study that male students consumed video games more often than female students, however, I was not quite prepared for the extent to which the divide presented.

I noticed this gender-biased consumption trend only because when I was adding up the overall total values for the text form I was shocked at the overall lack of high frequency. For example, only five of the thirty-student sample indicated that they played video games ‘Every Day’ and twelve indicated that they ‘Rarely’ played video games—both figures incongruent to my initial predictions. In class, I would often hear students talk about video games or notice members of the class surfing the net to read up on video game cheats and news regarding game releases. As such, I was expecting to find a high video game usage amongst the sample. What I did not account for, however, was the fact that nearly all of the students who displayed such an active involvement with video games were in most cases male. Once I realized this, I decided to return to the survey data in order to collate a gender-specific total.
The resulting male/female totals offer some interesting data. For example, of the twelve students who indicated that they ‘Rarely’ played video games, eleven of these were female. In addition, of the five students who indicated a daily consumption, all of these were male. In fact, female students accounted for nearly all of the rare users, and the boys conclusively accounted for all of the frequent users. Even though my study is only on a small scale, I believe it may reflect a broader trend that sees boys as frequent users of video games, and girls rarely using them at all.

Graph 8 - I play Video Games…

Video game consumption data is of particular interest to this study as the text form represents one of the significant new frontiers in branding (Quart, 2003: 126-142). In fact, one would have to be severely misinformed to believe that video games escape the heavy influences of corporate branding. Espen Aarseth, Editor-in-Chief of the online academic journal Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research, writes that video games hold far greater cultural importance than movies or sports for some people, adding: “the potential cultural role(s) of computer games in the future is practically unfathomable. It seems clear that these games, especially multi-player games, combine the aesthetic and the social in a way the old mass media, such as theatre, movies, TV shows and novels never could” (Aarseth, 2001: ¶3). Quart (2003) sums up the highly branded nature of video games when she quotes Will Kassoy, a vice president of global brand management at the game company Activision, who says that “an advertiser who
places a logo in a Tony Hawk game gets one billion ‘quality brand impressions’ from teens playing the game. By ‘quality impressions’ he means that teens playing the game over and over make deep positive associations between the brands and the game” (Quart, 2003: 127).

Part Two - The influence of popular culture, branding and corporate ideologies on the subjectivities of young people

So deficient reality is transformed into the imaginary, and the imaginary is superimposed upon the real in such a fashion that the imaginary transforms, takes over, becomes, the real. (Gutman, 1988; in Foucault, 1988: 112)

The guiding polemic of this dissertation has been an argument that the heavily branded, corporate-driven ideologies and discourses in popular culture texts, position young people to assume certain subject roles, contributing in significant ways to their everyday social experiences and subjectivities. I have collected considerable data as evidence to support this argument, spawning from both the broader quantitative survey and the five-student case study interviews. It is important to note, however, that although both quantitative and qualitative data has been utilized in the following analysis, I have favored the qualitative interview data due to the fact that it presents more rich, detailed and specific evidence, and also in order to validate my methodological commitment to pride the often-silenced student voice as a major analytical tool.

Ascertaining the extent to which an individual is influenced by complex concepts such as ideology, popular culture and branding is no easy feat, and this is made clear in the work of Schor (2004). Such concepts certainly have their place in academic discourse, yet collecting worthwhile
data to help frame such arguments is extremely difficult. This is especially true of the survey, as quantitative collection tools of such a nature are devoid of the personal elements of an interview and force one to rely solely upon the wording of the questions in the hope of translating appropriate meaning. For example, very few students in my thirty-student sample would have understood words such as “ideology” or “subjectivity”, so it was very hard to construct the survey in a way that allowed participants to effectively indicate the extent of the influence and nature of their involvement with such concepts. To an extent this was also an issue during the interviews, as I could not utilize vernacular of such an academic description when speaking to 16-year-olds. As such, planning the kinds of questions to ask students in both the survey and interviews involved detailed consideration to create more student-friendly and context-appropriate language.

The data analysis herein is informed by Foucauldian theories on subjectivity, and I have utilized three key Foucauldian concepts to categorize this analysis: dividing practices, subjectification and normalization. The first two are the two modes of the ‘objectification of the subject’ as outlined by Foucault and are essential in any Foucauldian analysis of the subject. The latter I have chosen because I gathered a great deal of data in evidence of the heavy normalizing influence that brands and corporate ideologies had on the day-to-day lives of my participants. It is important to note that whilst I have organized the data in congruence to these three concepts to aid the clarity of my argument, there are several cases where data relates to more than one of these areas. This is because Foucault’s theories are interrelated in many ways. For example, Foucault’s theories of exclusion and self-surveillance relate intrinsically to all three areas of this analysis, and normalization is intrinsically connected to dividing practices and subjectification. Even elements of dividing practices and subjectification theory can move fluently between each other.
Both quantitative and qualitative data provided evidence of dividing practices at work in the everyday lives of my participating students and suggested a very real and intrinsic relationship between such practices and the types of ideologies promoted in popular culture texts. Dividing practices, in a Foucauldian sense, refers the process whereby individuals are objectified—unwillingly or not—by processes of division that serve to imbue these individuals with varying forms of power and social identity. These forms of power and identity serve an exclusionary purpose. In many cases, the branded ideologies in popular culture texts appeared to have direct and negative impacts on the everyday lives of my five case study participants.

Participants spoke fluently about the ways that they or their peers were excluded from peer groups, subcultures, or even the broader social fabric of school for various reasons. In many cases such reasons were related to the old teenage quandary of not ‘fitting in’. However, very little was juvenile about this dilemma, as in most cases it seemed that one of the best ways to ‘fit in’ was for individuals to mirror popular trends or align themselves with popular culture’s ideologies. Sometimes students made direct links between popular culture trends and such dividing practices, yet more often than not students appeared to accept such pressures as unfortunate yet inevitable.

One of the most telling forms of dividing practices at work in the lives of my case study participants manifested in situations where individuals would describe feeling relegated or removed from the popular social fabric if they did not own or acquire certain brand name artifacts that held currency in popular culture discourses and their lives. I feel this is symptomatic of the fact that corporate ideologies often preach the message that if you lack the ‘necessary’ products that their brands provide, then you are socially inferior. Chris spoke fluently about such ‘brand name politics’ at work within his group of friends:
Because I hang out with more surfie kind of people, you go to the surf shops and spend $110 on jeans and stuff, just because it’s Billabong, but you could go to another store and spend 40 bucks or whatever but you don’t ‘cause there’s no point buying that non brand name stuff.

Chris was quite aware that he would always buy particular products or ‘surfie items’ such as the brand Billabong in order to feel more accepted. An interesting point Chris made is that he didn’t want to take the chance of buying something that wasn’t a known brand within his group of friends:

You could get away with it but you’d rather not take the chance of someone noticing or something, so I guess you just wear the brands, pretty much in most cases just so you’re more accepted.

Chris seemed aware of the importance of brand items in his life, yet he also displayed the opinion that despite being an integral factor for social acceptance, brands didn’t bring any good to his life:

It’s like the whole want and need thing pretty much. Like you want that kind of stuff but in the long run you don’t really need brands and stuff in your life and it doesn’t really improve it that much. I know that.

Erica spoke about the ways that brand name items had a damaging effect on her life and the lives of people she knew, and said that young people are commonly rejected and excluded if they do not conform to the images of popular culture:

Let me give you a hypothetical scenario. Say a girl comes to school and she’s wearing no brand names, not sticking to any of the fashions of popular culture - what happens to her?

I think she gets rejected. Well she gets rejected by a lot of people I think. Some people would like laugh at the fact that she might not have, you know, enough money to get all the brand names and that, making her an outcast and a kind of a member of a certain group of people…

Amy also voiced concern over the considerable extent to which she felt the social currency of her peers divided people into “certain groups” based on brands, clothing trends and accessories. Amy said she was committed to avoid falling victim to this need to “fit in”, and said she did not feel
the need to have to adhere to all the latest fashions. She attributed her ‘resistive’ stance to the fact that she had a good relationship with her parents and felt loved. Amy spoke with disdain of her peers and their love affair with brand items, and said that her peers would try to directly emulate the fashions of popular magazines:

AMY One of my friends is very much into labels and brands and things like that and yeah they both influence. She also reads Girlfriend and Dolly and stuff like that and then she’ll see one of these handbags and she’ll go and buy it because she just thinks it’s so cool and pretty…

GS Do you think that brand names and products and things like that are quite important for teenagers to define who they are?

AMY Most of them, most people yeah. They go for Billabong, Roxy, and the more they have of brand things the better they are. They like to show they buy whatever is in the magazines and stuff, so probably yes that’s right. If you look at people like the surfie group of girls, they always walk in with Roxy shorts or Billabong bags or whatever caps, it’s like you look at them and you don’t see the difference between them because they’re all always wearing the same thing.

GS Would be hard to be a part of their group without buying into those fashions?

AMY I think it would. You couldn’t, you would be discriminated if you weren’t wearing things, like it’s just not their stereotype. If they are all wearing Roxy and you come and wear some cheap imitation you just, they’re going to feel superior to you so it’s very important for you to fit in with the other people.

Damon talked about the ways that “a certain skater group of boys” at school would bully him because he dressed “alternatively” and was a part of a Gothic subculture at school. He pointed out the ways that the skaters would define themselves based on branded artifacts and music:

DAMON The skaters define each other only by the clothes they wear and the music they listen to, like they wear sort of your skate brands and listen to pop punk music, and like they basically believe that if you’re not into those same things then they’ll bully or hassle you or whatever.
Despite a wealth of interview data to this effect—offering such clear evidence of the ways that brand names influenced the day-to-day realities of the case study participants—quantitative data from the thirty-student sample was in opposition, as a majority of students indicated that they felt brand names were not important in their lives. Graphs 9 and 10 demonstrate this trend:

Graph 9 - It is important to follow the trends and fashions that we see and read in popular culture texts…

Graph 10 - The products and brand names advertised in popular culture are very important in my life…

I find these graphs to be particularly interesting, as I feel they reflect a broader belief in youth culture that conformity of any kind is a disparaging notion—heavily fuelled by corporate-driven popular culture texts that consistently promote the message that to be ‘different’ or ‘individual’ is the zenith of possibility for one’s existence. Such texts are almost always accompanied by the
paradoxical implication that with the help of the ‘original’ products of certain brands, we can ‘stand out’, ‘be seen’, and ‘make an impact’ in the crowd. Obviously these messages are flawed at their very core, as any theory that suggests the acquisition of mass-produced products can constitute a sharpened individuality is evidently ludicrous. Such messages are, however, in line with Mansfield’s (2000) suggestion that current Western subjectivity is constantly on the boil and is informed by the need to acquire a ‘compulsory individuality’ (Mansfield, 2000: 21). Yet, despite such trends, I have noticed that there is also an extent to which ‘buying into brands’ is acceptable within the discourse of youth culture, and that whilst teenagers define their subjectivities in major ways by brands and popular culture artifacts, they can also be quite suspicious of those who ‘sell out’ or appear to be suckers for new mainstream trends and fads. My observations suggest that the ‘coolest’ young people seem to be those who use brands in stylish, savvy and discreet ways, and who appear to not care about brand names or trends—almost like they have been imbued with a natural coolness that is removed from the need to follow trends. The idea, it seems, is that one should spend as much time possible trying to look a certain way, but then at the same time try to come off looking like one has not tried at all! The presence of such complex subjectivity monitoring processes may help explain the data in Graphs 9 and 10 and the fact that despite the weight of evidence to the contrary, a majority of students ‘Disagree’ that brand names are important in their life. This concurrent yet contradictory qualitative and quantitative data may suggest that whilst it is an ideological ‘no-no’ to be branded, in practice it is utterly necessary. As such, I do not find it surprising that when the words ‘brands’ and ‘products’ were absent within the survey and the thirty-student sample were asked more generally about the extent to which they felt popular culture influenced their lives, the results back-flipped completely (see over - Graph 11):
Data concerning processes of dividing practices in the lives of my participants helps support my argument that branded ideologies position young people to develop and negotiate their subjectivities by defining a status quo and by establishing a hierarchical social order—both determined by the extent to which young people can appear to be favorably in fashion with the ideologies and branded experiences sold through popular culture. Students appear to be most accepted when they successfully position themselves in relation to the popular dominant gaze of popular culture and brands and I believe that corporations and brand-makers understand this and play upon the insecurities of young people in order to promote their products. I also believe that many young people are not always consciously aware of these processes and the extent to which brand name products influence their lives—supported again by Graphs 9 and 10 that exemplify this contradictory position in which students display an acceptance of the ways that they are affected by popular culture generally, yet resist to admit they are influenced by brands.

2.2 - Subjectification

The Foucauldian theory of subjectification refers to an active process whereby individuals choose to render themselves as a particular type of subject in quest of their own self-formation—invoking operations on their bodies, thoughts and conduct—often in alliance with an external
authority of some nature. Of the three Foucauldian concepts I am utilizing within this data analysis chapter, I believe an analysis of subjectification is the most significant as it forms the core of Foucault’s theories regarding subjectivity. Hence, the following analysis involves more detailed consideration than either dividing practices or normalization. My analysis of subjectification posits popular culture and branding as an external authority to which young people align themselves and provides evidence to suggest that young people appropriate the discourses of popular culture and branding in significant ways and actively fashion themselves in light of this influence in an attempt to define their own sense of self.

Subjectification, however, is a complicated matter to research, because although it can sometimes be observed physically, it is also a process that can manifest at a deep psychological level. My research has led me to believe that young people are in some cases unaware of the ways they subjectify themselves in light of popular culture’s gaze. In many cases during the qualitative interviews, students did not initially seem to display any sort of understanding of the deeper ways that popular culture influenced their lives and at times they were unable to display an understanding of even its more obvious influences. However, as soon as I began to position my case study participants—through detailed questioning—to reflect critically and in detail about their fashions, peer group tastes and brand name preferences, most seemed suddenly surprised to realize the various ways they were influenced by popular culture. Many commented that previous to their interview they had never considered the impacts of branding on their day-to-day realities. For some it was as if they had looked into a mirror for the first time and as a result the floodgates opened. Ultimately, all case study participants provided detailed evidence of the ways that they or their peers subjectified themselves in light of popular culture’s ideological gaze. For example, Jade said: “I guess when you make me think about it, I realize just how much my life revolves around popular culture. Everything I do is nearly to do with popular culture”. Other participants displayed similar perspectives and I think this highlights the fact that young people are almost
never positioned to critically analyze the influences of popular culture and branded ideology on their lives. Furthermore, it illustrates the extent to which popular culture has been naturalized in the fabric of youth discourse.

Students provided illuminating evidence of the exclusionary consequences that subjectification with the ideologies of popular culture had on their lives and the lives of their friends, and it is interesting to note that throughout the interviews students spoke very rarely of any positive effects that popular culture had on their lives. They were, however, keen to speak about the ways their lives were negatively affected as a result of popular culture’s various influences, and presented as highly suspicious of their peers’ popular culture and brand interests.

Amy and Erica discussed in detail the ways that popular culture texts had positioned them to adopt deep-seated ideological perspectives regarding what was acceptable body image for young women and they were able to vocalize the significant stresses that such positioning had on their lives. Erica spoke in depth about the ways that her friends subjectified themselves in relation to popular media stars and their fashions. An example of particular interest is when Erica talked about one of her friends’ obsessions with the popular television show The OC. Erica noted a direct link between her friends’ behaviour and a character on the show:

ERICA Girls are very pressured, yes I see it. One of my friends is very obsessed with The OC and she’s actually changed into kind of one of the characters off The OC because she loves her so much. There’s nothing wrong with that, she’s you know still her own person but you can tell by the clothes she wears and by the way her gestures are now and stuff like that, it’s very much the same, she is just like, she loves that show and so you can tell how that show is influencing her. She’s changed a lot since she’s been watching it … but you know, I don’t know of a big girl on The OC. All the OC girls are thin, they are you know, all pretty, they’re all fashionable, and then all the guys are like well, there is the nerd but you know like besides that it’s kind of like they’re always perfect and they always look perfect and life’s not really like that.
Amy provided evidence of the ways that teenagers are positioned to adopt the dominant gaze of the white Westerner and talked quite passionately about the fact that she felt ethnic minority groups were severely excluded within popular culture texts. Amy also drew a direct link between such exclusionary ideologies and her everyday experiences at school. Amy is from Brazil and said she identified with minority groups because she was of a darker skin color and was often labeled Muslim or Lebanese as a result. This ethnic labeling of her by peers is in line with Mansfield’s suggestion that “in the second half of this twentieth century, human differences have increasingly come to be understood not in terms of race and blood, but culture and ethnicity” (Mansfield 2000, 120-121). Amy blamed the media for making her feel outcast because of her skin colour and spoke of the ways that her Asian peers were trying to actively change they way they looked in order to subjectify themselves in alliance with a popular Western conception of beauty:

**AMY** It is horrible. They must feel so excluded from everything and that’s why most Asians, well that’s why I believe most Asians I know are trying to change. They’re all going blonde and women are putting stuff, and changing themselves. I think that’s the effect that the media has on them because they just feel that they have to change because that’s not what society is looking for. Maybe that’s what they think?

This comment reminds me of many of Greenfield’s (2002) interview participants who spoke of the elaborate ways girls as young as seventh grade would get nose jobs, cheekbone realignments and a variety of other plastic surgery operations in order to fit the ‘beautiful stereotype’. I believe that Amy’s opinion on this matter reflects a broader disenfranchisement of minority group culture in an insidious corporate-driven globalized media market that defines itself largely by the limiting desires of a white Westernized model of existence. I am highly suspicious of the limiting subject positions made available for young people in this model, as I believe it sells a monocultural existence. I wonder at the social and cultural losses we must be experiencing as a result of a youth culture that is positioned to adopt such limiting subject positions.
One of the major areas of interest to emerge from my analysis of subjectification was the extent to which some of my participants subjectified themselves in response to popular subcultures. Given my heavy involvement with an active subculture as a teenager, this was an area of particular personal interest, and it is therefore not surprising that my investigation of subjectification led to a plethora of evidence regarding subcultures and their effects on the subjectivities of my participants. Overall, my analysis clarified the extent to which subcultures thrive on processes of exclusion in order to define an acceptable status quo. In most cases, my participants who heavily identified with an active popular subculture talked extensively about the ways they would fashion themselves in relation to specific subcultural trends, supporting my concept that the very nature of subcultures involves an active identification with a particular external authority and a choice to assume a particular subject position. Two of my case study participants—Damon and Jade—indicated that they belonged to a subculture. Chris indicated that he was “sort of part of the surfie subculture”, but didn’t really seem to associate himself too much with it. Amy and Erica both rejected the idea of being part of a subculture and talked vehemently about the negative impacts of doing so. Despite this range of student locations, all students spoke of the ways that subcultures were limiting in their very nature. Even Jade and Damon displayed high levels of frustration at the ways their subcultures would move with the tides of popular culture and how they felt subcultures excluded anyone who didn’t prescribe to very strict guidelines for image, interest and style. Erica spoke of the way that subcultures would “influence everyone at school”, even if individuals were not involved in the subculture, and Amy said being in a subculture was “the worst thing someone can do”.

In terms of Damon and Jade, there was a direct and obvious link between the music they listened to and the subcultures to which they aligned themselves. Jade admitted: “Music is very important, so important, like it controls a lot of my life”. Damon said: “Everything I do is somehow linked to music, it is linked to every part of my life”. Of the two, Jade displayed the heaviest
commitment to subcultural style, associating herself with the Emo/Hardcore subculture. Jade
demonstrated a strong belief that the music she listened to was related to “the scene” of people
she associated with both in and out of school, and said that fashions of the bands and artists that
were popular within her subculture directly influenced the way she dressed.

Emo/Hardcore—for the reader less exposed to current youth culture—are actually two separate
subcultures that have merged significantly over the last few years. It has now become a popular
culture trend to refer to the marriage of the two as ‘Emo-core’, however if one wants to be
specific, then the two are essentially different. Hardcore refers to a form of music born of the
punk scene during the early-1980s that has developed extensively over the last 25 years and
although it is well-documented to have arisen with clear emancipatory ideals, its current form is a
heavily co-opted and watered-down form of its original. Hardcore music is a faster more
aggressive form of punk that grew out of Eastern North American cities and quickly became
associated with veganism, abstinence from drugs and alcohol, tattoos, and of course the music.
The music is now associated with commonly fast, hard-line punk, screamed instead of sung—a
reason why many hardcore bands are referred to as ‘screamo bands’. Emo, on the other hand, is
an abbreviation to describe the musical genre of ‘Emotional Rock’ or ‘Emotional Punk’, and has
really only been a word associated with youth culture since the late-1990s. The term didn’t gain
mainstream frequency until about 2001, when bands such as Jimmy Eat World and Saves The Day
started referring to their music as belonging to the genre. Emo is a term now commonly used and
for better or worse has also progressed beyond its original meaning. For example, the character
Seth in the mega-popular American TV show The OC is commonly referred to as an ‘Emo kid’.
The term has become associated with a range of popular culture iconography, such as died black
hair, tight black jeans, polo shirts, skinny boys, skinny girls, intellectual college kids, and angsty
mainly American teenagers who have their own net-blogs and listen to certain types of bands. If
the reader is curious, they should check out MOC [www.makeoutclub.com], a US-based website
that is essentially a bizarre form of a dating site where teenagers and young adults of this
subculture post up their own pictures and photos, describing themselves and their tastes. The site
is also awash with poetry, heavily stylized self-photographed portraits and angsty teenage
commentary on love, life, sex, drugs and music. *MySpace* [www.myspace.com] is also a global
online meeting place for these subcultural groups. At the school where this research took place,
the students refer to the subcultural group to which Jade belongs as the ‘Emo/Hardcore kids’, so
I will stick with this dualistic definition.

Jade admitted that she was part of the Emo/Hardcore scene, but preferred to define herself
*against* the more commercial mainstream elements of the subculture. She seemed to consider
herself a real long-time member of the scene. Jade offered detailed insight into the ways that the
subculture influenced her life and the lives of her friends, and was very critical of those
individuals who fashioned themselves in light of the subculture’s trends, but *did not* listen to Emo
or Hardcore music. She talked about the ways that a lot of her friends had *become* Hardcore and
referred to these people as if they had committed fraudulent acts. Jade seemed to place a lot of
currency on being part of the ‘far-left true echelons’ of the subculture and she was very
suspicious of new ‘mainstream’ blood. As a result of her deep subjectification with the
subculture, she policed and excluded elements that did not fit her own concept of authenticity:

**JADE**  It’s so stupid because most of the people aren’t real. Like for the last few years now I’ve been
within that scene and now it’s like as soon as it became popular everyone’s like *Emo Emo
Hardcore*, and everyone’s become Hardcore, you know. So now they’re all into Hardcore and
you have to wonder how long it’s going to be before it’s something else. I think it’s stupid. It’s
just what they wear mainly, it’s not even about the music, that’s the other stupid thing, it’s
about how they dress mainly you know, they truly believe they’re alternative but they’re not.

Jade’s language was drenched in this type of exclusionary tone, and she referred even to her own
friends as “they” with the implicit suggestion that they were not part of the real essence of the
scene. She seemed to define subcultural currency based on the extent to which an individual could authentically subjectify himself or herself with this essence—which was essentially the extent to which they were involved with the music. Because of this, Jade looked down on new members of the subculture for subjectifying themselves with the appropriate trends and fashions of the subculture, despite the fact that she wore the same fashions herself:

JADE These two girls have like completely changed their style now to kind of suit a group of girls who are kind of within the Hardcore/Emo scene . . . so many people, like a friend of mine the other day, she was all like, ‘now that like skinny leg jeans are back in fashion and lots of the girls at the gigs and the guys as well wear them, I’m going to as well’. Just last year she was wearing just normal jeans like, and now she says things like ‘oh I went shopping to like the city and it was so gross they only had flared jeans’ and I’m like ‘hello you used to wear them like not even six months ago!’

Jade went on to talk in detail about how most of the subculture’s dress code comes from Hardcore bands and other people in the scene who meet each other at gigs and on the Internet. She talked about the ways that these popular culture influences determined the way she dressed, yet when she talked about her own fashion she was not dismissive as in the above example. Rather, she played on the edge of irony, almost positioning herself as a ‘fashion victim’. Maybe this was to annul any kind of attack given her previous dismissal of her friends? Or maybe it was just a blatant unconsidered contradiction?

JADE Two years ago I never would have thought about wearing skinny leg jeans, I’d have been like ‘eeww’, but now I have them because they’re like they are in fashion again and all of a sudden they seem to be cool. I know it’s shallow, and it’s shit . . . like the whole flannel shirt thing coming into fashion. Like I went to a gig the other week and there were like at least ten girls wearing flannelette shirts and I’m like ‘oh my God, they’ve all started’.

GS So are you saying the way you dress is not important?

JADE It’s not important but, and I like don’t want it to be important, but somehow you’re just influenced and it happens and you can’t help it.
GS  Why do you think it’s so important to these people you’re talking about, to dress exactly the same and to listen to only that one type of music?

JADE  I think they just want to be accepted and like when it comes down to it it’s about being insecure and they just can’t be comfortable with themselves unless they’ve got like the acceptance of other people.

I find this final comment to be extraordinary, given Jade’s previous exclusionary comments towards other members of the subculture. Here, Jade has made a rather piercing observatory comment as to why she believes young people in general become involved in subcultures, again using “they” to remove herself from the analysis—taking on a critical eye in opposition to the forms of subjectification born of subcultural involvement. This distant reflective position in which she reflects broadly on the negative elements of the subculture contrasts sharply with the ‘far-left position’ in the subculture she represented just moments earlier. Jade moved from policing the dress standards of her peers and excluding them for very specific reasons, to saying that the way people dress is not important. She was a mass of contradictions and in both cases failed to reasonably acknowledge her own position. This may suggest that Jade is not accustomed to reflecting upon and analyzing the influence that this popular subculture really has on her life.

Evidence of Jade’s heavy association with this subculture deepened throughout the interview, and my continued questioning of her involvement in ‘the scene’ eventually uncovered what I now consider one of the standout discoveries of this research project. This is Jade’s involvement with the online pornographic website *Suicide Girls*, an American website that features an array of Emo/Hardcore, Punk and Gothic girls posing naked for the pleasure of what the site itself suggests is a strong male and female fan base. Jade explained that her involvement with the website was directly related to her involvement in the Emo/Hardcore scene, and said she was a self-professed idolizer of the 18+ pornographic site. Jade appeared to have subjectified herself in alliance with the ethos of the website, and said that she aspires to be one of the *Suicide Girls*. Jade
was very excited when she talked about the website, and explained that she initially became involved with the *Suicide Girls* because of her boyfriend:

**JADE**

He used to have this little joke with one of his female friends about how like me and her would end up like these *Suicide Girls* and I’m like ‘what the hell are the *Suicide Girls*?’ and then I don’t know he showed me and I was like ah it’s so cool and I was in awe of the people on it.

**GS**

Why you were in awe?

**JADE**

Because of the good looking people on it, the girls.

**GS**

But they are a certain type of girl though aren’t they?

**JADE**

Yeah I guess, they’re Emo and Hardcore girls. Some of my friends who aren’t into that kind of scene, they’re like ‘what the hell it’s so weird’. Yeah they have piercings and tattoos and everything.

In making these comments, Jade has established a direct link between the subculture in which she is actively involved, and a pornographic website that enamors girls from this popular culture group who strip and pose for a paying audience. On the *Suicide Girls* site, one can find profiles of the posing girls who—in addition to posing naked—also post up information about themselves in a net-blog fashion, such as information about the kinds of music they are into, the tattoos they have, and other aspects of their lives. Most of these aspects are, however, popular culture references. I would suggest the reader takes a tour of the site [http://suicidegirls.com/tour], where they can read the complimentary quotes of rock stars such as *The Foo Fighter’s* Dave Grohl who says: “The great thing about *Suicide Girls* is that they completely tear down that Pamela Anderson image. They’re beautiful ladies with crazy tattoos, piercings and dreadlocks”, or a quote from Britain’s biggest music magazine *NME*, which says: “… *Suicide Girls* offer a version of erotica devoid of big hair and boob jobs, instead showcasing the kind of girls you’d find in a mosh pit”. There is also a quote from *MTV*, the most watched music station in America, which says: “Think of it as *Friendster* with nipple rings”. In addition, the site itself has interviews with
popular culture icons such as Ethan Hawke, Katie Holmes, Chuck Palahniuk and an array of popular bands. As such, Suicide Girls represents a very unique melting pot of popular culture, pornography, and subculture, whereby girls of this particular subculture are encouraged to pose—almost like the act is a logical extension of the subculture—to allow oneself to be fetishized for the display of others. Furthermore, the startlingly diverse range of popular culture celebrities who wholly endorse the site offer the site fantastic product endorsement that must be remarkably influential to the average teenage or adult consumer. Jade has subjectified herself in alliance with the popular notion on the site that there is a strong distinction between the Suicide Girls—which is ‘her kind’ of porn—and mainstream or regular pornography. The latter she considers “seedy and offensive”.

GS Because the girls have got piercings and tattoos and a lot of the girls on Suicide Girls are from that current alternative sub-culture, do you think that makes it any different to normal porn?

JADE Yes because like normal porn is just like gross to me because like all the girls are like those typically bimbo sorts and what not and like, I don't know.

GS I'm just going to play devil’s advocate here. I mean a lot of people complain about pornography and say it disempowers women and it’s very derogatory towards women. Isn’t Suicide Girls just as derogatory?

JADE In some ways yes, but then in some ways no, because it’s more than just a porn site. It’s like um, well I don’t know, you can like go on and read their journals and like they write down the stuff they like and there’s all, like it’s just different. It’s not like typical porn . . . it’s got the new section and that and people can become members and that’s like another reason why I like it. I like it a lot because like it’s got a lot of stuff about music and that in it as well.

In this final comment, Jade has illustrated an intrinsic link between the music of the popular subculture in which she is involved, and pornography—both of which are corporate-driven entities that rely upon the presence of her subculture in order to make a profit. Jade went on to say that she was in fact a member of the site—which requires 18+ identification—and that she
reads all of the *Suicide Girls*’ journals and finds out a lot about these girls. All of this may shock some readers, but as a teacher of young adults, it doesn’t surprise me at all. The fetishization of the young female body is rife within popular culture and for Jade such images appear to be far from disempowering. Instead Jade sees the website as material worthy of idolization. The kinds of subject positions made available for girls like Jade within texts like the *Suicide Girls* are extremely limiting, however Jade seems to associate the site with a sense of freedom and excitement. When I asked her who she thought the majority of the site’s paying members were, Jade said that they were Emo/Hardcore girls and guys, however I am sure this is far from the actual truth. Emo/Hardcore and Gothic fashion, with its make-up, piercing, bondage-style clothing and tattoos, harbors obvious associations to fetish culture—a widely promoted sexual desire in popular pornography. In fact, as I write this dissertation, the *Suicide Girls* has just launched a world tour; with key members of the site performing live in none other than a Burlesque show! Jade is a 16-year-old girl who seems to believe that becoming part of the *Suicide Girls* will equate to subcultural currency. *Suicide Girls* is no more than a cleverly branded corporation, masquerading under a veneer of subcultural identity, yet Jade does not see this. It is branded in such a complex manner when compared to your average porn site, yet at heart its product undeniably remains the same. In many ways, Jade’s involvement with *Suicide Girls* is entirely analogous of the second level of my dissertation argument, providing rich and extreme evidence of some major ways that popular culture and branded ideologies influence the subjectivities and everyday experiences of young people. Jade’s subjectification to the Emo/Hardcore subculture undeniably influences her everyday actions, her perceptions of beauty and coolness, and her idolization of what many may consider problematic depictions of women. Not only does this interview data with Jade epitomize the exclusionary ‘to be or not to be’ pressure of subcultural dynamics, but it also highlights the fact that her experiences in the subculture are informed directly by brands and corporate ideology in ways that she is not even
remotely aware. Jade’s involvement and interest in *Suicide Girls* and Emo/Hardcore subculture gives her important currency in her life and social circles, so therefore it is utterly significant to manufacture her subjectivity in light of these influences. Jade’s ‘Emo/Hardcore’ reminds me in many ways of my ‘punk rock’ ten years earlier—and just like me, Jade is unable to reflect on her involvement with this subculture in any significantly critical way.

The data born of my interview with case study participant Damon is also worth considering in this section regarding subjectification and subculture. Damon is an overtly artistic teenager who sat in the interview with long black and purple hair, black nail polish, eyeliner, a tight black t-shirt and black leather jeans. He seemed to define himself largely on his ‘left wing’ politics and a resolve to nonconformity—yet in all observable ways Damon had fashioned himself perfectly in line with the Gothic subculture. Damon’s strong association with music came through his active involvement as a singer in his band that he described as part of the “progressive gothic black metal” genre. For readers who need a signpost, think of Marilyn Manson as being an exorbitantly commercialized ‘powder puff’ figurehead of the same genre. A few months before the interview, Damon had made a video clip in Media Studies that featured the brutal execution via stabbing of a girlfriend who had cheated on her boyfriend. It caused some problems in terms of censorship within the class and generated some very interesting discussions regarding the representation of violence towards women in the media. My observation of Damon is that he is an extremely intelligent and interesting student who feels distanced from his peers in many ways, yet his commentary was not without the usual teen angst and inconsistencies in his beliefs.

Damon’s opinions regarding subculture were interesting, because like Jade he was in many ways a complete contradiction, caught in between the desire to subjectify himself with popular culture and subculture—to define his identity—and his apparent need to be considered an individual. These contradictory positions, I feel, are symptomatic of a co-opted alternative culture and a
common marketing campaign for youth culture that again sells a ‘compulsory individuality’. The subculture with which Damon identifies is one that defines itself in opposition to the ‘conforming masses’ so he was very tentative about having his involvement with ‘the scene’ viewed as anything but subversive. Damon said initially in the interview that he idolized members of the Gothic subculture and copied a lot of clothes that bands and musicians within that scene wear, and this was visibly evident. However, he was smart about this, being careful to remind me that whilst he does so, it is entirely because he loves gothic and heavy metal music, and not because he is involved in a subculture. He then proceeded to say that he is involved in the Gothic subculture out of school, but then when I asked him about this, he reverted quickly and said that he is not a member of a Gothic subculture, but more correctly a member of the “general alternative scene”. Damon then said that he and his friends are part of the “Emo scene”, but then followed this by extensively slagging off this scene, before finally proceeding to say he was not part of any subculture once more. It is my opinion that subcultural identity is of supreme importance for Damon, however, he struggles immensely with this, because he is very media-literate, quite intelligent, and he seems to try very hard to define his own position against conformity of any kind. This must cause I lot of pain for Damon, as in his mind it seems that conforming to the expectations of a scene is the worst thing he can do—as he is ‘not original’ if he does this. Because Damon plays in a band and admits that music controls his life, he is very careful not to give the impression that his band is like ‘other’ Gothic bands, and I think it is for this reason that he tries at most stages to rebel against his obvious involvement in the subculture. When talking with Damon, I was reminded of myself as a teenager in many ways. As a self-professed Punk, I would become very angry when someone would challenge me with an idea such as ‘what makes you so alternative for wearing the same clothes as all the rest of your friends?’ or ‘you don’t know anything about anarchy, because you still go to school and your Mum does your washing’. Comments such as these cut deep at the time, and made me very angry, because I knew that essentially they were true. As a result I
pushed the limits of fashion further and further, trying to define myself as a ‘true punk’ in what I didn’t realize at the time was a reasonably commercialized subculture. This didn’t work either and soon I came to learn that my subculture was more limiting than empowering. I believe Damon showed an awareness of this dilemma and unlike Jade he displayed evidence of some active reflection on the matter:

DAMON  I guess I follow the trends of subculture almost subconsciously, I don’t know. I don’t think ideally it should be important, like you should be able to dress however you want and there would still be another person from another sub-culture who will talk to you and be friendly with you. A lot of that doesn’t happen but I think it’s important to still try and push for that to happen so I don’t think people should go out saying that ‘oh I’ve got to wear such a thing so that it will get me in with some particular group’.

Despite this awareness of the exclusionary nature of subcultures, Damon still policed the fashions of other young people who deviated from what he considered being authentic. He also contradicted himself in seemingly ignoring the fact that he has subjectified with all the hallmarks of a scene himself. He spoke at length about Jade’s group of friends, whom he despised for all looking the same and copying each other to adopt the Emo/Hardcore look, despite the fact that he said he often hung out with them:

DAMON  It’s become such a mainstream thing now, and lots of people would want to be in that fashion so they’ll go around, go to gigs where the Hardcore bands are playing and stuff. It’s definitely a whole scene and to me they all look exactly the same. They all wear those shoes, the tight jeans, and I think they want to be associated with that particular scene rather than actually liking the music. I know a lot of people that never used to like that particular music and now given the right scene has come along and it’s trendy, they want to be a part of it.

Damon said that “the Emo/Hardcore kids are just mainstream clones” and throughout his commentary on this group his voice took on a condescending tone that seemed to imply that in comparison he was far more alternative. In Damon’s attempts to avoid subcultural labeling, he eventually said that he was defined solely against the mainstream, which I feel was an easier black
and white situation for him to deal with. Damon then spoke about ‘the mainstream’ as being something that was defined by brand names and popular music and television. I believe this is in line with a trend of late for some young people to promote themselves being ‘anti-brands’, ‘anti-America’ and ‘anti-corporations’—despite the fact that such ‘subversive positions’ often appear in reality as no more than useless branded ideologies themselves. I also believe that Damon may have picked up on the subtext of my questioning as he went on to say that other subcultures are reliant upon brand names to define their subcultures, whereas his subculture is not. In doing so, Damon had created for himself a valid space from which to justify his ‘alternativeness’:

DAMON … so for example the Surfie guys, you know, if someone doesn’t wear the right labels and stuff then they’re rejected. It doesn’t really bother me. If something looks good then that’s what I like more than the label on it. Like lots of my clothes I get my friends to make because I’ve got a mate that’s a fashion designer, I’ve lots of that kind of stuff. Definitely you see a lot of Surfie guys around that wear Billabong and brands like that and you see a lot of you know pop-punk kids that wear Dickies and that kind of business so I think those kind of subcultures are more heavily for brand tastes.

Damon also talked about the ways that “punk guys” would hassle him out and said that punk was the worst part of mainstream youth culture. Damon said members of the subculture could not handle him doing anything different from their norm, which constituted “dressing in their skater type clothes or listening to their commercial pop punk” music. It is important for the reader to understand that when Damon referred to Punk in this context, he was referring to a group of students who followed the fashions of skate and surf brands and who listened to pop-punk bands such as Blink 182, NOFX and Lagwagon, not the circa 1970s/1980s definition of the subculture:

DAMON Lots of punky guys give me hassle and there’s also a few guys that I get on with really well and they can sort of see past that…

GS Why do you think that some of them give you hassle?
DAMON Well probably because their mates expect them to and probably because in the media and on TV and that kind of stuff, people like me are definitely seen as a sort of a minority group and there’s all sorts of stuff associated with that you know. Tough guys that have stereotypical images like ‘I’m a big strong guy, get into lots of fights’ tough guy. It sort of almost pays to not feel the passion and become a minority.

I find this last comment interesting because of Damon’s suggestion that it is probably safer and in one’s best interest to choose to follow the mainstream image of masculinity as presented in the media, and to inhibit one’s passions in preference for safety through mediocrity. In saying this, Damon shows an understanding of the fact that he is excluded and hassled for not fitting in to images that the media produces. A similar line of argument is echoed by Erica, who said that she used to be a part of a subculture at school, but no longer is because she felt like she was constantly being “bitched about” if she didn’t wear the right clothes or keep up-to-date with the fashions that were popular with the “surfie” girls she used to hang out with. Erica seemed quite aware of the ways that popular culture influenced the everyday experiences and organization of social groups at school, and in her own words highlighted the types of dividing practices that resulted. She said that subcultures at school “divided everyone into bits”:

ERICA Yes definitely, especially in this school, you don’t get the chance to ever meet or talk to other people because of the kind of subculture you’re in, like the ones who just all listen to the same music and wear the same things all the time. You’re forced to do it, even with the girls I used to hang around with who were all surfie and glamour queens.

Amy also talked with disdain about the ways that her peers would fashion themselves in various ways, referring to members of subcultures as “easily led”. Amy made the point of asserting that she was not in any way involved in a subculture, and suggested that young people would choose a subcultural identity for themselves in order to feel comfortable:

AMY . . . with those groups you can’t really tell the difference because they all like the same things and they all dress the same . . . they are just so obsessed with that type of fashion or that type
of music they just, like they’re blind for like, they close their eyes for the other stuff. I think that is what it is.

GS          Why do you think they become “obsessed” like you say and group together in this way?

AMY         Well they just find what they actually feel more comfortable with and then its like their identity so they just assume that identity and they think ‘well that’s what I’m like and that’s what I want today’ and it just happens.

Whilst Amy and Erica both displayed such a conscious distaste towards subcultural politics and the exclusionary nature of social groups who define themselves by brands and popular culture, it is important to mention that in no way do I feel that either of them had managed to transcend the gaze of popular culture or to escape subjectification with popular and corporate ideology. For example, even though Erica said that she no longer hung out with the “surfie and glamour queens”, she later went on to say:

ERICA       I used to be one of the most popular girls at school when I hung around that old group of friends, but I couldn’t like be bothered with it, like I couldn’t be bothered always having to wear the exact right brands or wearing the make-up that was cool at the time, so I don’t care that I’m now not as cool or whatever, but I feel better as a person.

This suggests that although Erica may now harbor a critical opinion of her ‘surfie/glamour’ ex-friends—who defined themselves by the latest fashions, ideologies and brand name artifacts of popular culture—she still uses them as a benchmark by which she determines her own position in the social hierarchy at school. In other words, even though she had been empowered to realize that these girls were popular for inane reasons, she was not able to escape the influences their popularity had on defining the coolness of every other girl. Erica appeared to have chosen to be “not as cool or whatever” so that she could feel “better as a person”, but this doesn’t change the fact that her own worth in the broader school context continued to be defined by the popular girls. As a researcher, it was important for me to realize this, as I have now formed the opinion
that one's critical faculty does not necessarily allow one to escape the grip and realize freedom from subjugation in a society defined by the desires of popular culture.

Such a wealth of qualitative interview data regarding the ways young people subjectify themselves with popular culture is also supported by some of the quantitative survey data. For example, Graph 12 reflects my attempt to ascertain the extent to which students felt their friendship groups were informed by the same sorts of popular culture experiences:

Graph 12 - Within my friendship group, most of us share similar pop-culture interests/tastes…

This graph indicates that it is not only the students whom I interviewed who felt this way, but that an overwhelming majority of the broader thirty-student sample also appeared to use popular culture to help define their friendship groups and social identities. In addition, it is not only students actively involved in subcultures who use popular culture texts in such significant ways.
2.3 - Normalization

The world stretched out before us not as a slate of possibility, but as a maze of well-worn grooves like the ridges burrowed by insects in hardwood. Step off the straight and narrow career and materialism groove and you just end up on another one—the groove for people who step off the main groove… (Klein, 2001: 63)

As the ideologies and discourses in popular texts continue to position young people to assume subjectivities that are increasing defined by branding and corporate ideology, I believe that the opportunities for young people to experience lives divorced from commodified and packaged notions of identity are on the decrease.

As corporations continue to expand their branding campaigns into every skerrick of our waking lives I feel we are positioned to adopt very mainstream corporate ideologies that rely upon the common denominator in order to reach the broadest range of clientele as possible. Even the ‘leftist alternative culture’—which helped define my own experiences for many years—is being increasingly co-opted by corporations who create new ‘alternative’ niche markets and sub-brands, or by new corporations who define their brand essence on a faux ‘opposition to the mainstream’.

My case-study interview data suggested that the corporate ideologies latent in branded texts often have a normalizing effect on the everyday lives of my participants and revealed that young people’s social currency is often defined by the extent to which individuals can demonstrate an alliance to the ideologies of popular media. It would seem that individuals who deviate from such popular norms often experience subjugation and exclusion within peer and social settings.
One significant form of normalization at work in the lives of my participants was the extent to which my participants felt that popular culture texts such as magazines and television presented very limiting possibilities for female body image. My female participants spoke in depth about this issue. Despite their personal differences, Jade, Erica and Amy each said that girls their age were defined by the popular media’s conception of “beauty” and they all spoke about the direct and negative effects these representations had on their lives. Erica spoke in detail about magazines targeted towards young girls and said she was “a sucker” for reading such magazines on a regular basis. Erica displayed an awareness of the ways she was being positioned and reflected a basic understanding that magazine content is influenced by the sorts of brands advertised within:

ERICA … they will have issues, like articles in them about like self-esteem and how you can build your self-esteem, how it’s ok to be different and all the rest of it. But all throughout their magazines they’ve got all these skinny, beautiful girls selling products and you kind of think well can’t you, you know just widen the scope of the thing? … But then they won’t because I really don’t think bigger girls sell as much as pretty girls do I don’t think, because pretty girls sell products.

Not all of Erica’s comments were this succinct, and she often gave long-winded, confusing and contradictory explanations about her friends and the ways they were influenced by magazines; almost as if she was processing complicated thoughts for the first time as she was speaking. On her own accord, she did link magazines to television and talked about how representations of women on television influenced her life and the lives of her friends in similar ways to magazines:

ERICA TV is similar to magazines maybe, cause TV has a negative effect more than positive. One of my close friends she’s size twelve and she thinks she’s fat and you just can’t go anywhere with her because she’s just so low in self-esteem and I think that has a lot to do with what she sees like around, you know like advertisements… and also the TV shows she watches, they make her look fat she thinks, but she really isn’t fat at all, so I guess it gives her issues… also guys call girls fat as an insult even if they are not fat, I mean if they are not really skinny like that.
I believe these “issues” Erica described her friend as having most likely spawn from the pressure young girls feel to evaluate, measure and monitor their subjectivities in response to the dominant gaze of popular culture and branded ideologies. The fact that her friend “can’t go anywhere” because she feels too fat, suggests to me that this friend is heavily aware of society’s corporately-fueled dominant gaze and is afraid of constantly being watched and evaluated by it; hence she undergoes a demeaning process self-surveillance, symptomatic of Foucault’s prisoners in the Panopticon. As Lesko (2000) notes: “The panoptical gaze produces control through normalization” (Lesko, 2000: 111). If Erica’s friend is unable to physically normalize her own body in congruence to popular culture’s expectations, she instead chooses to hide it away.

Amy also provided some interesting evidence of the limiting subject positions available to young women in popular culture texts, and spoke in length about her dislike of the fact that in her opinion the stereotype for women had “never changed”:

**AMY**  The women’s stereotype in my opinion never changed since however many decades ago ‘til today. Women have to always look beautiful and satisfy men so I don’t think it ever changed for women. When you are seeing TV programs they are always … like this show the other day had all three men being interviewed and this woman in bikinis is just doing nothing, just there, just as an object, she was doing nothing and she was just there in bikinis and the guys were all wearing pants and suits and she was just in bikinis, just there for the guys to look at.

**GS**  Do you find that offensive as a young woman?

**AMY**  Definitely. We just think that, I mean what are we doing to our image? Like why are these women even accepting to do that, to look stupid. I don’t know it’s just shit.

**GS**  Do you think that you and your friends accept this image, are influenced by this image and try and play up to this “pleasing the guy” stereotype?

**AMY**  Yeah girls are, but not me. Well every other girl that I know except for some exceptions, they’re always trying, and they’re saying ‘ah I went to the beach yesterday and these guys were looking at
me, and I was wearing this new bikini’. They are always trying to please guys and the problem is
guys are not like that, but guys couldn’t care less, they just leave so I think the girls should stop
worrying about that too much.

What I find particularly interesting about Amy’s attitude towards this matter is that she appeared
to define herself against the ‘popular actions’ of her friends in a way that she seemed to find
personal currency by transcending their ‘infantile’ discourses. Several months after this interview
took place, I had to escort Amy and a few other students to an awards evening at an out-of-
school location. For the few days preceding this event, all Amy and her best friend talked about
in class was their planned dresses and fashion tid-bits for the event and I even watched them flick
through popular magazines and consult websites for ideas as to what they should wear. They also
talked about what kinds of guys would be there and how they planned to “dress classy” in
comparison to the girls from other schools—obviously in order to compete for the boys’
interests. Therefore, it seems to me that despite Amy’s apparent hatred for the popular and its
effect on her friends’ lives, she is just as influenced by popular culture’s normalizing effects. In a
way, I believe that Amy’s interview comments were underpinned by a commitment on her part to
appear as critical and subversive as possible during the interview, partly because she may have felt
her critical faculty was being tested and maybe even because she was probably trying to impress
me by aligning herself with the critical subtext that must have accompanied my style of
questioning. Critical knowledge therefore, doesn’t necessarily equal change.

Jade spoke of the ways that most girls “all have to look like some Paris Hilton clones” and said
that she was glad she didn’t feel influenced to look like all of these girls. She said that it was still
important to be pretty in her subculture but it was not a “mainstream kind of pretty” that all the
other girls at school followed. Many of my female participants’ comments reminded me of the
research data of Greenfield (2002) and Quart (2003) whose participants also talked in similar
ways about the fact that everyone must look the same and wear all the same brand names.
Greenfield’s data in particular raised some interesting questions regarding the very real ways that brand names serve as status symbols and leave an undeniable imprint on the realities of young people’s social groups and individual subjectivities.

In addition to these normalizing pressures my female participants felt to look beautiful, wear the right brand names and act certain ways in relation to men, Amy raised the issue once more of the representation of minority cultures and furthered her earlier point about her many Asian friends who felt pressured to adopt the stereotypical “white and blond” stereotype. Amy linked their active attempts to change themselves with the fact that popular culture under-represented many minority groups and said that everyone was “expected to look the same all the time”, adding:

AMY Usually you don’t see Asians in any popular texts. None at all. When Gwen Stephano started using these Japanese girls in her video clips and everything it actually surprised me so much. I was asking myself why did she do it, 'cause you’re not used to seeing Japanese people and Asians in the media so it actually surprised me, very daring too. Instead of just following the stereotypes and having lots of blondes or whatever she just chose to do something different… But still blonde white girls are still the average.

Amy’s data signifies the added pressures that young individuals who belong to minority cultures must bear as a result of being positioned to adopt certain looks and identities that they will never be able to realize due to their skin colour, accent, religious beliefs, etc. As a result, it would appear to me that such individuals have very little choice other than to be subjugated within the mainstream fabric of their social environments. In fact, to draw upon a personal example, a friend of mine is a radio journalist—employed at a commercial radio station in Sydney—recently told me of a saga that began when a disgruntled listener contacted the station to formally complain about a newsreader who speaks with a South African accent. The listener asked if the reader could please be removed—arguing that this was Australia not Africa, and that she was sick of hearing mispronounced words. One would think that such a comment would fall on deaf ears
in a ‘multicultural minded’ democratic society such as ours, but in fact the station’s boss
responded to the complaint by relegating the South African born journalist to ‘behind the scenes’
duties and removing her from on air broadcasts. Although incredulous, this is entirely true and is
just another example of the complex ways that a white Anglo-Saxon status quo is maintained in
commercial Australian media culture and indicative of the kinds of struggles that members of
minority cultures such as Amy and her friends will face in their futures.

Besides Amy, Jade was the only other student to respond to the idea of racial minorities and their
representation in the media, and made the following interesting comment:

JADE    Black or Asian girls are in magazines as well, but they aren’t the popular ones that the boys
want because they are shown in different ways. The white girls always look the best and are
represented with more sex appeal, as more appealing.

I find Jade’s comment interesting for many reasons. Firstly, she has suggested that popular girls
are defined by the extent to which they can be sexually desirable in terms of what “boys want”
and she says that the girls that look “the best” are always white. Secondly, she has highlighted an
often-ignored fact about the way that minority groups are often represented on the occasions in
which they appear. I believe that often when popular culture texts and their corporate sponsors
try to inject a sense of multiculturalism into their branding campaigns, the only real result is the
inclusion of a few token Black, Hispanic or Asian characters or models, who are most of the time
represented in a way that continues to legitimize mainstream hegemonic white ideologies.

This kind of unhappy symbiosis between branding and minority cultures was also echoed by
Chris who said that although there were often gay male characters in popular culture, they were
nearly always “losers” or “getting beaten up and stuff”, adding:
CHRIS For sort of gay guys it may be harder viewing ads when there’s always the more kind of macho 
guys, like I mean they might feel left out . . . I’m not gay or anything, but I think it’s ok to have 
gay people in TV and stuff, because there are gay people in the world I mean. But even when 
there are, like, gay characters they are always out-numbered and maybe looked down upon.

In making this comment Chris seemed keen to ensure that I understood that he resided within 
the realms of mainstream heterosexual ideology before he condoned the presence of gay men in 
popular culture. In making sure I knew that he was “not gay or anything” Chris serves as a prime 
example of the fact that whilst popular culture texts may sometimes include minority cultures, 
they do so in a way that still preaches the importance of inhabiting the normalized mainstream. 
Jade also offered some opinion of this nature on the ‘gay stereotype’, and criticized her favourite 
television show The OC for representing a bisexual character as some sort of “crazed lesbian”. 
Jade said it was one of the only times she had seen a bisexual girl on television and that she was 
“so stereotypical because she can’t just be normal and bisexual, she has to be this crazy bitch who 
beats up guys and stuff”. Damon said that he was often “labelled as gay” for dressing in a Gothic 
fashion that was different to the mainstream, and again made reference to the skater-punk guys 
who would hassle him on a regular basis:

DAMON If you’re not macho and talking about how pissed your going to get or like talking about how 
many girls you’re going to get at a party or talking about their kind of sports and music then 
they make you out as gay and hassle you out for it. It’s pretty lame, but it happens.

None of the other case study participants made specific reference to racial or sexual minorities, or 
offered any commentary on this point, even when asked. In fact, I feel that despite these few 
relevant comments, case study students showed very little awareness of the idea that certain 
minorities may be excluded in media texts. This is in line with the quantitative data collected from
the thirty-student sample, which suggested that students were generally confused as to whether or not they felt popular culture texts excluded or under-represented certain groups in society:

Graph 13 - Popular culture texts exclude (or under-represent) many groups in society…

The other major aspect of normalization to emerge was the influence that online culture had on the lives of my case study participants and the many ways they would manufacture highly normalized—and often subculture specific—online identities through the maintenance of personal web blogs. Unfortunately I can only offer a brief analysis on this topic as I admit I have gathered very little data in evidence, yet there is a valid reason for this. You see, in some ways I am unhappy that I didn’t conduct my research just three or four months later, as in between my semi-structured interviews in June 2005 and compiling the data between November 2005 - January 2006, there was a remarkable “MySpace explosion” that I observed within the class and within the school. MySpace is an online net-blog community where individuals can create their own blogs for the purpose of sharing online photos, journals and general commentary. Users are encouraged to ‘post up’ information about themselves into pre-determined categories such as music, gender, television and movies. I have been aware of MySpace for several years now as many bands I have interviewed throughout my time as a music writer have had their own ‘MySpace Music’ accounts. Yet at the time of the interviews I hadn’t yet noticed the extent to which my
students were using *MySpace* or the fact that the ways they were using it were remarkably different to the bands who commonly used the site as “free website space” and as a promotional tool. My key interest in *MySpace* is that I believe it represents a new era in identity formation for young people, whereby individuals produce highly crafted online identities. I believe *MySpace* can have a very normalizing effect on the subjectivities of young people as it categorizes their worlds in a way that almost assumes that one’s identity is entirely defined by popular culture—filing their subjectivities into genres like a record or video store on the popular culture market. *MySpace* is a breeding ground for subcultures and a fantastic way for young people to network with others who share similar popular culture interests. Although it is exciting as a new era text form of self-representation, I believe it also contains worrying elements.

Both Amy and Jade made brief references to *MySpace* during interviews, however, I didn’t follow this line of enquiry, as I hadn’t yet realized the significance of its growth. As a result of this oversight I conducted some informal post-research investigations later in the school year, talking with students about *MySpace* and gaining some insight that I feel is worth mentioning at this juncture. During the final week of the 2005 school year—when students had finalized their assessments and were allowed some free time in class—I noticed that a majority of my class members would spend their time online, monitoring, editing and communicating globally through their *MySpace* accounts. In the same class of thirty students to whom I had given the original quantitative survey, twenty-eight indicated that they now had a *MySpace* account. When I asked students who had established these accounts within the last three months, twenty-three of the twenty-eight responded. The entire five case study interview participants indicated that they now had a *MySpace* account and besides Chris they all indicated that they checked it daily. On the second last day of the school year, I noticed that Jade was near my class with a camera, flashing photos of her and her friends. I kept hearing her say, ‘*oh that’s the best MySpace photo*’ and other
comments to this effect, so I asked her if I could have a look at the photos. She was more than happy to show me and she kept pointing out which were the “MySpace ones”—in other words, the photos she would probably post on her MySpace blog. The photos she classified as “MySpace” were those which came off looking highly stylized and often sexualized, with her and her friends in provocative poses, or photos that made all of them look far older or appealing than they may have to the naked eye. I noticed the girls—who could all be considered part of Jade’s Emo/Hardcore scene—were all applying red lipstick and make-up and then drawing their black fringes in front of one eye, as they peered suggestively into the lens. Not only were they in the process of creating highly subjectified online personas, but also more than anything they reminded me of little Suicide Girls in the making. Jade gave me the URL of her MySpace account, and I found myself quickly teleported into the online world of her friends—both in and out of school—who for want of a better descriptor, really came off like a clone army George Lucas could only dream of. I felt I had discovered a new gold mine, so I made a point of informally speaking to Jade, Damon, Amy and Erica about why they felt MySpace was important, and I found their comments really interesting. All of them wanted me to see their MySpace accounts, and so I checked them out one by one as they showed me all the pictures of themselves and the things they had written. It was just five months after the interviews, yet already their lives had been infiltrated by a new and powerful popular culture medium to which they displayed an obvious commitment. I noticed how the popular culture and subculture influences they described months earlier had quite literally manifested themselves in cyberspace and the ways that each of them were using MySpace to help define their own sense of self. Damon’s profile was awash with Gothic iconography and he had stylized the site in dark blacks and reds, and enabled a function so that when you clicked onto his profile heavy black metal music would blast from the computer speakers. Erica even had a blog she had posted on hers about fashion accessories and brand name clothing—almost as if she were the editor of a girls’ magazine. One of my other students
had “swinger” entered under her Gender category, and had a personal quote on there that read, “looking for action”. I was horrified to think that Erica had just months before displayed an apparent hatred towards the subjugating nature of girls’ magazines, yet had now so willingly assumed the role as a mini-producer of exactly the same kinds of ideologies. More than ever did the subjectivities of my participants appear defined by popular culture texts and ideologies as they produced, monitored and subjectified themselves in light of the discourse of this new popular culture text form. Recently, several of my own friends in their mid-to-late-20s have established MySpace accounts and post all sorts of information about themselves on a regular basis. I find it sad because even though I know they are all living very different lives, their MySpace accounts do not reflect this diversity. What’s more, I don’t need to speak to some friends anymore, because if I’m curious about what they’ve been up to I can just check their URL. I have often been asked why on earth I don’t have a MySpace account.

Part Three - Popular Culture in the English classroom

It is now necessary to analyze pedagogical issues specifically, in order to interrogate subject English and areas of it that hold relevance in terms of the integration of popular texts in classroom practice. Firstly, I will argue that educators often silence the everyday textual experiences of young people and that many are failing to effectively engage students in the empowering and meaningful analysis of popular culture. Secondly, I will argue that many English teachers are ‘out of touch’ with popular culture and that these English teachers who are not adequately versed in current popular culture trends are far less likely to be able to effectively engage students in the analysis of these texts in critical and meaningful ways.
3.1 - Silencing the everyday experiences of youth?

I have gathered clear quantitative and qualitative data as evidence to suggest that the texts of primary concern within subject English are not at all congruent with the everyday textual experiences of youth, supporting recent suggestions that schools are ‘losing touch’ with the experiences of young people (Lewis, 1998; Morrell, 2002; Buckingham, 2003a; Faulkner, 2003).

My quantitative survey was structured in a manner that allowed for a direct comparison of students’ textual consumption patterns and the extent to which they indicated they studied these very same texts in English. This comparative analysis has proved to be enlightening and suggests the texts that have high currency in the lives of my students are being silenced or uncritically negotiated in their English classes.

Firstly, if one considers the ‘high frequency’ texts from the consumption pattern analysis in Part One (Music, Television, the Internet) and then considers the frequency with which students indicated they studied these texts in English (see over - Graph 14 and Graph 15; and Graph 16 on page 162), the graphs are in direct opposition. Twenty-six of the thirty-student sample indicated that they listened to music ‘Every Day’, and twenty-five indicated that they watched Television ‘Every Day’. In comparison, twenty-one indicated that they analyzed music in class ‘Not Very Often’ or ‘Rarely or Never’, and the analysis of television texts favored the ‘Sometimes’ and ‘Not Very Often’ categories:
Graph 14 - How often do you analyze/study **Music** texts in English? (e.g. Lyrics, songs, etc)

![Graph 14](image)

Graph 15 - How often do you analyze/study **Television** texts in English?

![Graph 15](image)

Data pertaining to the study of Internet texts at school highlighted a more significant divide. Twenty of the thirty-student sample indicated they consumed the Internet ‘Every Day’ or ‘Every Second Day’, whereas twenty-three indicated that they studied Internet texts ‘Not Very Often’ or ‘Rarely or Never’ (see over - Graph 16):
Graph 16 - How often do you analyze/study Internet content and websites in English?

In considering Graph 16, I must admit that even though six students indicated that they ‘Sometimes’ study the Internet, I feel that they may be confusing the analysis/study of these texts with the process of utilizing the Internet in order to find material for assignments—the latter being a lot more common. Personally, I don’t believe that students at my sample school really study or analyze Internet texts at all, because it seems teachers do not facilitate such practice. I base this opinion not just on observations and talking with students, but also on conversations with the English Head of Department at the school.

If we now consider the ‘low frequency’ texts from the consumption pattern analysis in Part One (Books, Newspapers and Magazines) and compare these with the frequency at which students indicated they studied these texts in English, the graphs are also in direct opposition, suggesting that the texts most commonly studied in English are those that are rarely consumed in the everyday lives of my participants.

Twenty-two of the thirty students indicated they read Books/Novels ‘Every Few Weeks’ or ‘Rarely’, however, Graph 17 indicates that Books/Novels were the major text form studied by students in English, meaning that the text form least consumed in the students’ everyday lives was the most often studied in class (see over - Graph 17):
Graph 17 - How often do you analyze/study Books/Novels in English?

Students also indicated that Newspapers and Magazines were often studied in English, despite these being the two other ‘low frequency’ text forms within the consumption data. Twenty of the thirty-student sample indicated that they studied Newspapers ‘Quite Often’ or ‘Sometimes’ and nineteen indicated that they studied Magazines ‘Quite Often’ or ‘Sometimes’.

The final area of interest is the ‘taboo’ text of video games. Thirteen of the fifteen male students indicated they played video games ‘A Few Times a Week’ or more, whereas Graph 18 indicates that video games are basically not at all utilized as a text of analysis in class:

Graph 18 - How often do you analyze/study Video Games in English?

Some readers will argue that Video Games do not have a place in English, yet I disagree. For example, in Western Australia, official curriculum documents for English indicate that the subject
should cover four ‘aspects’: viewing, listening and speaking, reading and writing. The study of a video game text can offer excellent coverage of all these outcome areas, opening up the space for a multimodal analysis whereby students can analyze popular music, visual graphics, branding, ideology and narrative, all in the one text. A similar analysis is also possible through the study of Internet sites that incorporate several forms of text on the one page. By deploying the useful analysis of these text forms, teachers are validating a multiliteracies approach that I feel can generate very meaningful learning experiences. The only issue with video games is that given the strong gender bias regarding consumption, we may run the risk of distancing female class members during analysis. However, having said this, I have analyzed video game texts in class previously—such as the Sony Playstation game Grand Theft Auto—and the female members have been remarkably active in such discussions, often voicing strong opinions about the ways females were objectified in such games. The analysis of Grand Theft Auto opened up the space for male students to see the way that female students reacted to the fact that the only female characters in the game were hookers, strippers and overtly sexual gangsters—uncovering hegemonic discourses they had previously assumed natural within their predominately masculine game playing domains.

In terms of qualitative data, case-study students provided solid evidence of the ways they felt their everyday textual interests were absent or silenced within their in-class experiences. I spoke at length with the participants about the texts they most often consumed and the importance of these texts in their lives, and I also discussed the types of texts they studied in English in an attempt to find out whether or not the students felt critically engaged in the analysis of the texts on which they placed currency. I also asked students questions about whether or not they felt popular texts had a place in English and about their opinions regarding their experiences studying a range of popular and traditional text forms in the subject.
The majority of my case study participants expressed the view that it was important to study popular culture texts in English and based on their experiences argued that not only were such texts relevant and exciting to them, but also that these texts needed analysis because of the ways students were influenced by them. In almost all cases students argued that the study of popular culture texts was lacking. Students were surprisingly articulate in arguing such perspectives, such as Erica in the following example:

ERICA I think we need to know more about it and the effect that it has on people and on the society because it does have a future effect and people really need to know about it otherwise it becomes vague…

GS So do you think if people learn about these effects it changes their lives in any way?

ERICA Well it changes their perspective on it for a start, like you know it might make them turn around and kind of see that you know it’s not quite important to be just like someone else you know, or its not that important to be how an advertisement is saying that you should be . . . because at the end of the day we only live once and we shouldn’t really waste all of our time worrying about that sort of stuff. But we hardly ever analyze this stuff in English, maybe in Media, but not English.

Chris said that he thought he had become more knowledgeable about popular culture due to his study of it in Media Studies but not English, also acknowledging the fact that not every student studied media and that the ones who didn’t “wouldn’t know as much about it or the ways it makes them think”. Chris, Damon and Amy all said that they previously studied nothing but books and short stories in English until they recently received a new teacher who was more interested in studying popular culture texts such as song lyrics and movies. As a result Damon said that some of his friends were jealous because their English teachers “were very traditional and didn’t study any popular culture at all”.

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Most students supported the survey data that suggested English was predominately concerned with the study of books and novels. Students seemed quite complacent about this fact and even though they all thought that it would be good to study more popular culture texts, they appeared bound to the concept that English has and will always be concerned with the study of traditional literature:

CHRIS … with most teachers, all you pretty much learn about is the book side of things.

DAMON English is a subject that has a reputation of being to do with literature and poems and stories.

JADE I like reading literature, but it’s really all we like study and it’s not good all the time.

AMY … the English classes tend to go more to the literature side, a lot of rules, all we actually watch, all we actually study for popular culture is like current affairs or movies and advertising otherwise its all more like biographies, autobiographies, novels or not really Internet or things like that.

ERICA Yeah it’s like books, books, stories, stories, and mainly boring ones as well.

When I questioned students regarding their opinions on the introduction of non-traditional text forms into English such as video games and the Internet, there was a mixed reaction. Both Erica and Amy laughed when I said that maybe teachers could analyze the content and construction of Internet texts in class. When I explained to Erica the ways that teachers might approach such an analysis, she conceded, “we are probably oblivious to all that kind of stuff on the net” and added that she could imagine a time in the future when teachers might study the Internet. However, she then followed this by saying “I think they are more likely to steer toward obvious things like TV, Books and movies, because the Internet has so much to it”. Amy, on the other hand, said she could not see a place for Internet analysis in the subject. I was very surprised that even after I modeled the ways teachers might be able to use it for textual analysis she still said:
AMY  No I don’t think so, I can’t think of what they would look at if they were to study Internet. I just can’t think of what they’d be looking at.

Jade was of a different opinion and said that because young people were on the Internet so much, they should analyze it in class. She also highlighted the fact that even though students used the Internet so often at school, they rarely looked critically at it:

JADE  Well considering we use the Internet so much, not just in English but in all subjects I think it’s important that we do like look at it critically but um we don’t, we like never do ever.

On the topic of video games, student data was polarized, as Jade, Chris and Damon made strong arguments for the possible benefits of studying it in class, and Amy and Erica both dismissed the concept entirely. Jade’s entire basis for arguing the need for analyzing video games was because of the effect she thought they had on people her age and younger children. Jade distinguished between the ways that young people consume different popular culture texts, and said that because of the interactive nature of video games, they are more influential. Her opinion was congruent with popular angles often taken by the media—even though many of these angles are merely scare campaigns and have no solid academic grounding:

JADE  It definitely affects them I think a lot of people who play it don’t realize that it affects them but I think if you look at all the issues there’s like high school massacres and that it just goes to show it is … I think video games are actually like in some ways worse than like say a violent movie, like a violent video game is worse especially because you’re the one whose shooting the gun … in the movie you are seeing other people do it but in the video game you are part of the game, it’s like you are controlling what’s happening, you’re controlling the shooting and the death and the like the violence so I think it has more of an influence on you.

Damon also agreed that video game analysis would be useful, however, after I showed him the gender weighted survey data he said that studying such texts might “alienate a lot of girls”.

Damon said that he remembered an assignment he completed in primary school that involved
analyzing video games, and said that “it was really interesting, I got really good marks for it and I definitely think you could easily study them in school”.

Chris said that he thought the study of video games was a good idea and said that he played video games on a daily basis. When I talked to Chris about the survey data and the fact that video games seemed to be played predominately by boys, I asked him if he thought that the study of such games would therefore benefit boys more than girls. To my surprise he disagreed:

CHRIS Guys play a lot more video games but it would still be just as useful for girls to analyze it as it would be for boys, like they’d still analyze it just the same as a guy would.

GS Say for example we introduced video game analysis in the English classroom, do you think that the students would generally be pleased about this?

CHRIS Yeah, it’s something different and they’d enjoy it I’m sure. You’d enjoy it a lot more than having to analyze a text or something because it’s something new you haven’t tried before.

After making this comment Chris went on to talk about the new Sony PlayStation game *Playboy: The Mansion* that he had been playing recently. He laughed and joked, and said that it would be good if his English class could study the game. The game allows players to play the role of *Playboy* tycoon Hugh Hefner, and build their own playboy empire. As Hefner, one can partake in a range of activities with countless topless playboy bunnies in the house, including lap dances where the bunnies simulate sex as they grind in g-strings on Hefner’s lap and unlockable game secrets such as real Playboy covers and centrefolds. In such a textual climate it seems crucial that we in fact do study these texts in the classroom, although I can imagine many uphill battles before an average Head of Department allows teachers to start doing so.

In general, students were of what I would consider progressive mindsets—open to change and able to see the benefits of widening the scope of the subject. Many of their comments reinforced
for me just how media savvy many young people are these days and also how they yearn to understand more about the texts that influence their lives in such major ways. There was, however, an exception to this norm, in the case of Amy whose views on popular culture in the English classroom differed considerably from her peers. I find this interesting because although Amy was capable of recognizing and talking very fluently about the ways that popular culture influenced her friends and peers, she almost flatly refused to see any potential benefits of studying such texts in English. In fact, Amy’s entire opinion of English was remarkably informed by the ideologies of the cultural heritage model. In some cases she rejected outright the possibilities for enjoyment and learning to take place in the subject and suggested that English was a subject predominately concerned with teaching functional grammar and language skills. Amy said: “books and novels are what English is supposed to be about” and seemed to define herself against the “Australians” who couldn’t read properly and should be reading more books:

AMY: Teenagers today don’t give literature its value . . . Australians actually have very bad English, their spelling mistakes its just horrible. For someone that comes from another country and learns it right, well actually it hurts your eyes to look at it, so many spelling mistakes. I just hate it so much so I think people should read more and improve their language. Its so fun to read you just go to another world, you just escape from reality for some time so I just think you can take so much from reading.

I find this comment very strange, as the way Amy referred to “teenagers today” almost implies that she is not a teenager herself. Amy would often speak in this ‘conservative adult voice’, leading me to believe that her parents—and/or an upbringing that has relentlessly prided the merits of the literature canon over the ‘nonsense’ of popular culture—may have directly influenced many of her views on this topic. This is further supported by the fact that Amy appeared to have drawn a line between the ‘fun texts’ of popular culture, which she said were an “out of school thing” and novels and fiction that she felt were “in school texts”. Amy also said
that she thought the study of too much popular culture would “take the fun out of it”, and really seemed to view popular texts outside the realm of relevant learning. She added:

AMY … it will spoil the fun of listening to music, watching movies and Internet if you actually study it. I know some people who like songs a lot but they don’t actually like studying them. They prefer to just like let their minds go free.

This idea of Amy’s that it may be better to “let their minds go free” is of some concern to me, as although I understand Amy’s definition of freedom in this context, it is wholly antithetical to the kind of intellectual freedom that I feel can be produced through the critical deconstruction of such texts. I reminded Amy of the massive impact she previously said that popular culture had on young people’s lives, at which point she did relent slightly, and said that maybe there should be a balance of popular culture and traditional texts. However, even when saying this she displayed some serious doubts, still tending to lean towards an opinion of the subject that would have only Leavisites flying flags of praise:

AMY Well because media is everywhere maybe you should have a balance of it, though I still tend to think that English should be more traditional but still you should have some popular type of text.

GS Why do you think that there should be more traditional texts?

AMY Because of the language in media if you analyze TV programs and stuff you are not actually seeing how the grammar is used and the vocabulary, you are just talking and listening so I think, I always think reading it is the best way. Popular culture texts don’t really teach much.

Amy’s voice seems aligned with that of the majority of English educators I have observed in the system, however her views are most definitely located in a minority position when compared to her peers. I believe Amy’s views present as dated, contradictory, and heavily influenced by ideologies that seem to have effectively convinced her that the value of literature transcends the
frivolous influence of popular media. I find this troubling because as discussed earlier I feel Amy is just as influenced by popular culture as all of her peers—whom she apparently looks down upon—yet her opinion is one that fails to recognize the importance of deconstructing such texts in class. I feel that students such as Amy would benefit in major ways from the critical deconstruction of popular culture in English as such practice may allow them to bridge the gap between their in and out of class experiences, allowing them to realize that popular culture texts actually inform their day-to-day realities as opposed to being merely flippant fantastical accessories that are removed from schooling and the formation of their own subjectivities.

At the heart of this dissertation is the suggestion that teachers who fail to deploy critical pedagogies that validate and investigate the popular culture experiences of youth run the risk of producing students who are unaware of the ways they are being positioned to adopt certain subject roles by corporate-driven popular culture texts. I feel that the data I have gathered resoundingly supports this concept and highlights some of the many ways that educators may be silencing the everyday experiences of youth.

3.2 - “You Gotta Be Involved” - English teachers are “out of touch” with popular culture

If English teachers are not adequately versed in current popular culture trends and do not understand the important ways that students are influenced by popular culture texts then it is highly unlikely that they will be able to effectively engage students in the analysis of these texts in critical and meaningful ways.

It has long been a belief of mine that far too many teachers have passed their ‘used by date’ and that the profession needs to be rejuvenated with critical educators who have the will and capacity
to enact relevant change in the lives of their students. It is important to add that I am by no means basing such a ‘used by date’ classification on the age of teachers alone, for some of the most critically mobile teachers I have witnessed have been twice my age, and some of the most mundane and spiritless teachers have been new graduates much younger than myself.

Both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data suggested that many English teachers with whom the participants are regularly involved are ‘out of touch’ with popular culture and that even when they do engage the students in the analysis of popular culture they do not do so very well. Students indicated that they enjoyed studying popular culture texts but in many cases the popular culture texts that their teachers chose were out of date or boring. All students indicated that it was important for their teachers to stay up-to-date with popular culture so that they could make their learning experiences more exciting.

Given that students indicated that they studied popular texts rarely in English, the situation seems even more worrying when one considers the following data in Graph 19, that indicates twenty-five of the thirty-student sample believe that when their teachers do use popular culture texts in the class, their abilities to teach such texts are ‘Average’, ‘Not So Good’ or ‘Not Good At All’:

Graph 19 - *If you have* analyzed some popular culture texts in *English*, how good do you think your teacher was at teaching you about these types of texts?
Qualitative interview data suggested that students had a very keen eye for the kinds of teachers who were good at dealing with popular culture and those who were not. This was particularly apparent during the many instances when I asked students about their experiences with popular culture analysis in English and they would pre-empt their response with comments along the lines of ‘well, it depends on the teacher…’. Chris was adamant that his new English teacher was the only reason he now liked the subject, drawing strong contrasting comparisons between his new teacher and his old teacher who was “very traditional”:

CHRIS See it depends on who your teacher is really on what you’re studying at the time because like my teacher at the moment well he teaches media as well so therefore we focus more on the advertising and the movies and stuff whereas at the start of the year I had an old English teacher and she focused more on the books and reading books and stuff every single week and it was so painful. I enjoy more studying the media based stuff than just sitting there reading books, it’s a lot more interesting.

Chris went on to say in a very haphazard manner that as technology changes, teachers have to understand that the texts they teach have to change as well, and said: “you can’t cancel out books all together but they’ve got to understand that as the years go on they are becoming less and less in our lives”. Chris highlighted the point that it wasn’t good enough for teachers to merely study popular culture, and said that what was more important to him was the quality of the popular culture text itself. He said that if teachers didn’t choose interesting popular culture texts then the analysis would be just as boring as studying books. Chris used the example of the documentary *Supersize Me* and said that he enjoyed studying the text with his new teacher because it was relevant to his life and that he found it enjoyable to think about the issues it presented:

CHRIS Recently in English we watched *Supersize Me* about the guy going on that Maccas diet and stuff. I didn’t mind analyzing that at all because it sort of brings up certain suggestions and stuff about obesity and all that, the issues in society that we see every time we walk around and
wake up in the morning, like how he fights through and conquers in the world. I’d rather be analyzing stuff like that and it’s more interesting.

When I asked Chris if he thought it was important for English teachers to stay up-to-date with popular culture, he made the following interesting comment:

CHRIS Oh yeah when you’re teaching pop you’ve gotta be involved, like to teach that kind of stuff you’ve got to be up-to-date so you know more than what the students know about it so they learn as well, otherwise the kids would be teaching the teachers…

I really like this comment as it reminds me of an argument I had with a colleague several years ago. I suggested that if teachers didn’t start to get with the times then the students may as well start ‘teaching the teachers’ about popular culture, and it was strange to hear the same concept argued by a 16-year-old with such clarity. Chris was not alone in this sentiment, as both Damon and Erica agreed that teachers were often unaware of the fact that they were out of touch with many of the recent popular culture trends:

DAMON It depends on the teacher, like I think the teachers like to think that they’re giving the kids something sort of new and exciting all of the time but often they’re not. Like in English so most of the stuff that we’ve gone through is books like Looking for Alibrandi and books that are sort of angled towards teenagers but they’re actually not interesting at all, and have been around for ages.

Erica furthered this point and made reference to a teacher she had who she said could not effectively teach them because she was “out of touch with reality”:

ERICA Ah one teacher I had a couple of years ago kind of didn’t know that much about what we go through these days like she was out of touch with reality. She would just go on about referring to traditional texts and stuff and some of it was good but it really needed to be varied.

GS How did it make you feel when you had this teacher who was going on about stuff that was not really relevant to you?
ERICA  Hard to understand. Hard to relate. Hard to yeah just understand and like also hard to, what’s the word I’m looking for? Oh God I don’t know but it was just really hard to like take in.

GS  So what happens if you have a teacher who doesn’t keep up-to-date with popular culture?

ERICA  Then you can’t, well I guess if they don’t get popular culture these days then you end up just going by what you think. I think it’s good to hear an adult’s perspective rather than ours all the time because our minds aren’t sometimes as advanced and are kind of immature that way.

Erica’s point here about ending up “just going by what you think” really highlights that she is aware of the fact that popular culture texts really do need analysis and she makes the case that she needs an adult perspective to help her do this. This is not the only time Erica almost insists that young people need help analyzing popular culture texts. Later she said: “We need teachers who are excited about these things as well, but who are able to help us read into them and think more about them”. Amy also agreed that the teaching of popular culture would be pointless without a teacher who was up-to-date and could relate to the interests of the students:

AMY  If they want to make the class interesting they have to teach something that the students can relate to and something that they would be interested in. If they choose some old text no one will be interested in except some old people, then you’re just not going to want to study. But if you start studying, I don’t know like Destiny's Child or something like that, they are going to have more interest in it.

When asked ‘It is important for students to study popular culture texts in English?’ twenty-four of the thirty-student sample indicated that they ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’; further supporting my argument that students are aware of the need to study the texts that have such an influence on their lives (see over - Graph 20):
Despite this, both Amy and Jade demonstrated an awareness of how hard it may be for many teachers to stay up-to-date with young people’s popular culture interests, which raises a poignant issue in this debate: Just how involved and knowledgeable do teachers have to be regarding popular culture in order to successfully implement a meaningful critical analysis of its content?

JADE  It’s never going to happen that all our teachers are up-to-date with what we are doing, because I guess it takes more effort I think to stay up-to-date than it does when compared to just doing traditional texts or whatever. It just seems like it’s more difficult with popular culture.

AMY  If you compare young teachers with old teachers then their style of teaching is very different, that’s why if you have change teachers from term one to term two there is such a big difference. Some just don’t think the way we think so it’s definitely going to be hard for them to look up popular culture and harder for them to keep the class from being very boring.

Damon added to this debate making the following piercing comment:

DAMON  Teachers get their pay cheques and go home at four o’clock or whatever, so I guess that’s it. They’re not going to want to sit around all night studying popular culture to make it interesting for us, not I guess when they can just keep the old stuff rolling year after year.

However troubling Damon’s comment may be, I’m afraid it may reflect some truth about many teachers who do not actively attempt to “get involved” in the worlds of their students. Damon’s
comment suggests that he views many teachers as complacent and resigned to rehashing old and
tired teaching strategies, and that very few are motivated enough to explore new and interesting
possibilities. In truth, I agree with Damon’s perspective to a large degree.

At the end of the day, if teachers continue to silence the everyday experiences of young people
and do not attempt to “get involved”, then I believe their chances of being able to position
students to read texts critically are almost entirely extinguished. Personally, I have found that
trying to implement critical teaching practice in the English classroom is very challenging and
requires not only knowledge of critical literacy strategies and critical pedagogy theory, but also an
ability to engage myself in an ongoing and active process of honest reflection and self-analysis
regarding the effectiveness of my own teaching in order to keep the classroom alive and exigent.
I have failed many times over trying to motivate students, even when I have managed to choose
texts that are on the cusp of youth culture trends—hence, not for a moment do I wish to suggest
that validating the experiences of youth and being involved in the intricate landscape of
youth/popular culture is by any means a walk in the park; students regularly push my teaching
skills to the limits as I try to push their minds just as far. Yet on the flipside, I can say for certain
that teachers who display a total disregard for youth/popular culture—often coupled with out-of-
date pedagogical practices and attitudes vested in the cultural heritage model—stand to achieve
almost nothing in this current climate. All teachers, I feel, must at least try their best to stay up-
to-date with popular culture and strive for the most relevant and critically empowering learning
experiences they can provide. If this occurs, I’m sure the learning landscape of English will be
undeniably geared towards a brighter future. Teachers might be scared of popular culture, or
afraid to delve into the unknown, but I can safely say that those who refuse to try and lock
themselves inside boxes of comfort will resoundingly fail to accomplish any positive outcomes.
The disenfranchisement of my own identity that has defined the course of my experiences over the past two years has been arduous at best. If one removes the defining symbols and meaning-making signposts of one’s own identity, then there is no choice, initially, other than to be lost in a vacant whirlwind where tangible reason is unfathomable and logic is no longer palpable.

I realize now, as the end of this journey draws near, some of the major ways that the symbols and ideologies of popular culture have defined my identity thus far. As a result, I emerge into a brave new world, where the previous markers of self-constitution diminish rapidly, to be replaced with new subversive models for defining my locality in the fabric of mainstream society. This new location is far left of the experiences that appear to define many of my friends and family, and as a result my ongoing personal sense of theoretical stability and well being is forever offset or opposed by the common denominator that fuels the currency of the world in which I live.

In the film The Matrix, the lead character Neo is invited by Morpheus to discover the truth of the universe, and is presented with two pills: the blue and the red. If he chooses the blue pill he will fall asleep and wake up again in his normal world, with no memory of their conversation and free to continue living his anaesthetized yet fraudulent 20th Century existence. Yet if he takes the red pill he will live fantasy no more and will discover the brutal truth of his existence so that Morpheus can teach him just “how deep the rabbit hole goes”. The catch is, there is no turning back from the red pill and once he has learned to view the world through a new lens and read a new truth entirely, he will never be able to return to the haze of his former being. It takes no genius to guess that some time ago I swallowed a similar red pill in the Dublin pub.
In the beginning, I tried to reject the pill’s potency and I guess you could say I was routinely screaming for help to unlearn my mind. I remember sitting in a cafe in London’s Covent Garden one afternoon, considering giving up on everything because the muddle that knowledge had caused in my mind seemed far too intricate to untangle. I wrote a poem that day about wanting to go and live by the sea and work with my hands. It was a ridiculous attempt to cling to a naivety I could no longer harbor. I soon realized that it was only through knowledge—not by a lack of—that I would be able to decipher my demons.

Slowly and painfully, knowledge has allowed me the chance to justify, analyze and reflect upon a range of key junctures in my past and has spawned dramatic changes of late in my own subjectivity. Yet even as I sit here in my Sydney apartment, half a world away from the Dublin pub, by no means do I feel like a wholly empowered subject. I am a frequently dislocated subject of a burgeoning corporate Western culture, and in many ways, I bear the acute realization that if not carefully monitored, critical knowledge can still bring with it more pain than good. Sometimes when I am feeling down, the pain of my increasing knowledge yields more primacy than my will to reasonably tackle the world.

This city can be a very sad sight, because I don’t see things as I used to. I’ve been propelled forward with the harshest of critical mindsets and I don’t see a way out of this new world I’m heading towards. All I know is that there’s no going back. Sometimes I will check out the music press for which I used to write and worship, and head out on the town to the latest chic rock n’ roll clubs—hoping to inspire in me some of the naive energy of my former self—but I always return home earlier than expected. You see, rock n’ roll and alt-culture was for a long time my Whirling Vortex, and for years I feasted on a steady diet of ‘next big bands’, ‘hip’ indie clubs, ‘obscure’ vinyl records, hyped-up music press and ‘leftist’ haircuts. I really was Mary for a long
time, but now that I’ve been spat out of the vortex I know that there’s no chance of ever being sucked back in. For now, I reside beyond its warm condensed purr—suspended in the never-never and forever theorizing over ways to turn its switch off and spread the souls trapped inside more evenly across the canvas of life’s possibility. What’s more, when I look into the vortex these days, it’s not just my students or my younger self who I see inside; it’s the gamut of society chained to the wheels of a mundane and increasingly corporatized popular monoculture. The majority of my own generation—against whom I increasingly define myself—are some of the worst affected, as we are, after all, the first truly branded generation. A good friend of mine is a journalist and a subversive one at that, yet her colleagues prefer to talk about Big Brother and American Idol during lunch breaks than they do about the news. They mock her for her taking a subversive stance towards political issues and several have recently gotten plastic surgery to help them climb the male-owned media ladder. Young people my age are starting to have children and I grimace at the ways they seem to define their success as parents by the extent to which they can lacquer their offspring in each and every compulsory toddler brand-fad. I often find myself distanced from conversation with friends, as I really don’t share a place with them any longer. I am in essence in between days. I do not know where I’ll be tomorrow, but no longer care for where I have just been.

Are we on the same page?

I read a lot, I watch a lot, I try to read between every line and I switch back and forth looking for an answer to the cacophony this world inspires, yet the only belief I can harbor with any certainty is that there must be potential for the fabric of human society to discover forms of emancipation through further knowledge. Yet, there is certainly an uphill battle to be fought for this to occur.
I often feel surrounded in a horror-landscape and I want to make sure that the next generation of learners emerge with a heightened critical faculty when compared to my own. I think the children of today have the potential to become the most empowered learners in history, if they can learn to burn away a lot of the garbage on which my own youth readily feasted. I do not want future generations with identity crises like my own, I do not want Asian teens cutting up their noses and breasts to look like Hollywood glitterati, I do not want any future children of my own to be defined solely by the extent to which they can acquire the symbols of popular culture. In fact, there’s a lot I don’t want—the list just goes on.

I may not own Prada suits or a Boxster sports car and I can’t afford to take you out for dinner anywhere fancy, but I am privileged because my life has afforded me the access to information, education and this unlearning/learning of self that has allowed me to remove the shackles of what used to be a doomsday self. I am privileged, because I learn.
The (Formal) Conclusion.

During the course of this dissertation I have presented three levels of synthesized information to the effect of arguing that corporate-driven popular culture texts influence the subjectivities of young people in significant ways, and that critical pedagogical practices need to be further deployed by English teachers in response to these influences.

Firstly, I investigated the textual consumption patterns of my participants, and found that popular culture texts constitute the predominate form of consumed textual material. Clear trends emerged, allowing me to categorize textual consumption patterns into ‘high frequency’ and ‘low frequency’ brackets. ‘High frequency’ texts—with which students displayed a heavy involvement—included music, television and the Internet; and ‘low frequency’ texts—with which students displayed an infrequent involvement—included books, newspapers and magazines. I utilized this data to suggest that the ideologies and subject positions made available to young people in high frequency texts were highly influential in informing their subjectivities; and the ideologies and subject positions made available in low frequency texts played a lesser role informing their subjectivities. The other major trend to emerge regarding consumption was the remarkably gender-biased consumption of video game texts, a text form that emerged as extremely popular with male participants, yet extremely unpopular with females.

The second phase of my research primarily involved an investigation into the influence of popular culture texts on the subjectivities of my participants. In this analysis I favoured the rich and detailed qualitative data spawned from in-depth interviews with case study participants, coupled with my own observations. Data presented in remarkable congruence to my research polemic, generating a wealth of evidence suggesting that the ideologies and discourses in popular
texts position young people to assume subjectivities that are significantly defined by branding and corporate ideology, and that as a result these texts can often have normalizing, limiting and negative effects. Data also suggested that the social currency of my participants was often defined by the extent to which individuals demonstrated an alliance to the ideologies of popular media, and that individuals who deviated from such popular norms would often experience subjugation and exclusion within peer and social settings. Constructivist notions of subjectivity and an analytical framework heavily influenced by Foucauldian theory informed this analysis.

The third and final phase of my analysis turned its gaze towards an analysis of pedagogical issues specifically, in order to interrogate subject English and areas of it that hold relevance in terms of the integration of popular texts in classroom practice. Favoring both quantitative and qualitative data, I concentrated my argument on two important points that arose from data analysis. Firstly, data clearly suggested that the texts of primary concern within subject English were not at all congruent to the everyday textual experiences of youth, and I used this data to argue that as a result English educators may be silencing the everyday textual experiences of young people by failing to effectively engage students in the empowering and meaningful analysis of popular culture. Secondly, I presented strong data in evidence to suggest that my participants felt their English teachers were ‘out of touch’ with popular culture and needed to become further involved with popular culture in order to better enable their teaching of its texts. I argued that English teachers who were not adequately versed in current popular culture trends were far less likely to be able to effectively engage students in the analysis of these texts in critical and meaningful ways.

In sum of these two points, I argued that such various failures by English educators risk producing students whose everyday experiences are silenced and who are unaware of the ways they are being positioned to adopt certain corporate-driven subjectivities.
At four relevant junctures within the dissertation, autoethnographic-styled narratives were deployed in order to illuminate and deconstruct the important role that my own subjectivity has played in relation to the subject matter and the production of this research text. In retrospect, I feel validated by this decision to posit my own subjectivity as a central analytical concern, and I am somewhat proud that I have been able to utilize and re-birth many experiences and emotions to serve methodological and narrative purposes within academic discourse. Unpacking the histories, stories, subjectivities and pedagogies of myself as the researcher and utilizing my own life’s journey as analogous for emancipation has involved complicated reflective processes that have been often problematic and uncomfortable. Yet, despite the unrelenting clout of such an analytical process, I ultimately feel accomplished in my realization of the ways I have been able to transform my own subjectivity as a result. Someone once told me that ‘the best research is personal’—and it would be fair to say that I am beginning to see the validity in this statement.

Foucauldian theory has also played a major theoretical, methodological and analytical role in the production of this dissertation, and I feel compelled to acknowledge that this influence has burgeoned—in congruence to my furthered reading and understanding of Foucault’s work—as my research has progressed. During the initial stages of research planning, Foucauldian theory was certainly of some influence to my methodology, however, I had not yet conceptualized how I would deploy such theory in the analysis phase. Yet as data collection and analysis developed, I was in some ways astonished by how stridently evidence of Foucault’s theories resonated within the lives of my participants, which led me to eventually centralize Foucauldian theories on discourse and subjectivity within data analysis. Even at this final stage in the research journey, my understanding of Foucault’s work continues to grow, and in a sense ‘only time will tell’ of the ways Foucauldian theory may play out as an influence in any ensuing academic work I produce.
Methodologically this dissertation has been informed by a commitment to posit the often-silenced student voice as a prime data analysis source. This choice has been grounded in my desire to uncover the voices of young people that I believe are too often disenfranchised and paradoxically ignored within the same academic research in which they are the key subjects of analysis. I believe this decision has been of undeniable benefit to the strength of my research, and I feel that because I have featured qualitative student data so heavily within the data analysis chapter, the many various and important opinions of students have been given a rare space from which to reverberate in meaningful ways. I have been extremely pleased with the success of my engagement with the participating students and very pleased with the richness and quality of their data. The students have taught me a lot, and I value their contribution to my own life as well as my research. Their voices reflect important issues of concern within the society in which we currently live, and I feel validated in providing a vehicle through which they can be heard.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge once more the critical position from which I have produced this text, and remind the reader of its unashamedly political intent. Spurred by my own close relationship to the subject matter herein, this text has been informed by my belief in the emancipatory possibilities of promoting critical pedagogical practice, a personal desire to challenge the corporate ideological influences of popular culture, and a belief in the potential of creating liberatory pedagogies that can work to ‘transform subjectivities’ and in turn offer fresh and empowering ways of thinking. Partaking in this critical research endeavour has taught me the importance of striving for emancipatory goals in education that address social justice issues, and has inspired me to partake in future PhD study from similarly a critical location.
So… what does it all mean?

Not inconsiderably, the ‘so what’ factor of this dissertation leads to pastures of emancipatory possibility; the zenith being to motivate teachers toward a ‘politics of change’ that has the end result of engaging more young people in the meaningful, empowering and unrelenting critique of the ways they are positioned by the subject positions and ideologies of corporate-driven popular culture texts. Such critique will allow young people to problematize, re-imagine and therefore potentially transform their subjectivities; creating new forms of authentically felt experience in opposition—rather than in congruence—to the ideologies of corporate-driven media discourse.

The capacity to ‘transform subjectivities’ is most definitely a reality, argues Foucault—made possible by the fact that subjectivities are products of historically, socially and politically specific discourses and power relations, and are therefore fluid in their ability to change. For Foucault thought is “that which allows us to step back from our conduct and to reflect on what we do, on the conditions under which we come to act or react in particular ways, and on what effects this conduct might have” (Danaher, et al., 2000: 44); and criticism is “the critical work we do upon ourselves in order to ‘make’ our subjectivity as an object of self-reflexive thought” (Ibid.). Hence, Foucault argues that the end product of thought and criticism combined is the possibility for us to “problematise—and, potentially, transform—our subjectivity” (Danaher, et al., 2000: 45).

It is this process of thought, criticism, and transformative change I hope my dissertation can begin to inspire, by motivating teachers of subject English to start working with popular culture texts in a politicized manner that will enable young people to think critically about the various influences that popular culture has on their lives. This will engage teachers in a process of both validating the everyday experiences of young people and making meaningful and thought-
provoking connections between students’ in and out-of-school contexts; a shift that I believe will allow subject English to be pedagogically re-imagined as a site of empowering relevant discourse, and re-embellished with a sense of vivacity and inspiring opportunity.

Ultimately, however, such highfaluting transformative change is a particularly complex and arduous endeavour that I believe can only be generated by inspiring, intelligent and politically mobile educators whose affinity with the intricacies of popular culture is already heightened in order to effectively position students to read against the grains of texts with specific political outcomes in mind. In all honesty, what are the chances of this ‘high order’ critique occurring broadly when my data resoundingly suggests that in reality many teachers rarely engage students in the study of any popular culture texts at all? Furthermore, if teachers are really as ‘out of touch’ with popular culture as students suggest, then the hope of meaningful transformative change is even less likely. It would therefore seem that these dire areas of concern must firstly be addressed before any sort of radical emancipatory change can occur at the level of student subjectivities. As a result, the ‘so what’ of this dissertation has several more rudimentary and preliminary goals:

- To position English teachers to realize the important influence that popular culture texts and their latent corporate ideologies have on the subjectivities and everyday lives of young people.
- To motivate English teachers to learn more about popular culture texts; especially new interactive and online text forms such as the Internet and video games.
- To encourage English teachers to validate the popular culture experiences of young people by engaging students in the critical meaningful analysis of popular culture texts in class.

The fulfilment of such basic goals, I feel, will not only have major, immediate and beneficial impacts on the quality of learning experiences for young people in subject English; but will also
pave the way for educators to start thinking about ways that they can begin to advance their teaching towards higher level analytical work, whereby critical pedagogical practice is deployed towards the accomplishment of various complex aims—such as the in-depth investigation of corporate ideologies and branding, and the ways these factors work within popular culture texts to influence young people’s everyday lives, social spaces and subjectivities. I strongly believe that teachers should avoid complacency upon the enactment of change towards these rudimentary goals, because in an ideal world it is not merely enough for teachers to understand popular culture’s influence on youth, ‘get up-to-date’ with popular forms, and to start using these popular texts in class. Instead, I believe teachers should actively strive to ‘turn things up a notch’ by developing ongoing critical pedagogical practice that works to maintain empowering, politicized spaces in classrooms; spaces that position students to think critically about the politics of representation, power, knowledge and the influences of various ideologies.

This ‘ideal’ model for pedagogical practice is influenced by Giroux’s (2005) argument that educators must move towards a ‘pedagogy of intervention’ in which the political role of education is acknowledged, negotiated, and of central concern; rather than naively trying to pretend that one’s teaching is a neutral or value-free endeavour. As Giroux (2005) writes, pedagogy should be viewed “not as a technique or a priori set of methods, but as a political and moral practice” (Giroux, 2005: ¶32) that has the political role of illuminating “relationships among power, knowledge, and ideology, while self-consciously, if not self-critically, recognizing the role it plays as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within particular sets of social relations” (Giroux, 2005: ¶32). Giroux (2005) also writes:

… a pedagogy which attempts to empower critical citizens can’t and shouldn’t try to avoid politics. Pedagogy must address the relationships between politics
and agency, knowledge and power, subject positions and values, and learning and social change while always being open to debate, resistance, and a culture of questioning. (Giroux, 2005: ¶37)

Such revolutionary ideas, however, should not be mistaken as an insinuation that teachers should strive for the indoctrination of students or that they should use their authority to endorse political propaganda. I write this in my own pre-empted defence, as it has recently occurred to me that a division of academics exist who view notions of critical pedagogy in most unfavourable terms; and in fact, I have already been privy to some mild antipathy from certain members of the academic community with whom I have shared ideas regarding my research. As Giroux (2005) writes, “there is a general misunderstanding of how teacher authority can be used to create the pedagogical conditions for critical forms of education without necessarily falling into the trap of simply indoctrinating students” (Giroux, 2005: ¶36), adding in critical pedagogy’s defence that:

. . . many conservative and liberal educators believe that any notion of critical pedagogy that is self-conscious about its politics and engages students in ways that offer them the possibility for becoming critical . . . leaves students out of the conversation or presupposes too much or simply represents a form of pedagogical tyranny. (Giroux, 2005: ¶36)

Giroux (2005) makes the point that although many conservative and liberal educators believe in opening up possibilities of active debate and questioning among students, they do not take the next step of connecting such dialogue to ways that young people can move towards re-imagining or changing the world around them. He writes that simply “teaching students how to argue, draw on their own experiences, or engage in rigorous dialogue says nothing about why they should
engage in these actions in the first place” (Italics added; Giroux, 2005: ¶36). In other words, it may be superfluous to develop a culture of questioning amongst students, if teachers are not going to politicize such discourse with the aim of social transformation and change.

Another charge born of the ‘anti-critical pedagogy’ academic community is the unfounded accusation that writers and researchers such as myself view young people as ‘cultural dupes’ who are ‘passively influenced’ by the media. Epistemologically speaking, I do not at all endorse such a view, and consider any such claims to be simplistic insults to the cathartic aims of my research. Far from considering young people as helplessly moulded subjects of capitalism, I more correctly view them as potential agents of change, who need further access to the empowering possibilities that can be logically provided by intelligent and capable educators who subscribe to critical pedagogical practice. Today’s generation of youth are far more media savvy and literate than any other generation thus far, however, being savvy doesn’t necessarily mean that these young people are aware of the extent to which their subjectivities are informed by corporate-driven ideologies and the subject positions that their complex media-saturated worlds offer. I believe that these individuals are, however, more than capable of realizing this influence and learning to interrupt and resist it. I can vouch for this whole-heartedly, as I certainly consider my former self to have been disempowered as such; until through access to critical and empowering knowledge I was able to position myself to problematize and disrupt the extent of corporate culture’s influence.

In addition, I realize that I have opened myself up to a similar attack due to my alliance with Foucauldian theory, which is often vehemently opposed by writers who argue that Foucault’s work implies that individuals are ‘scripted’ entirely by society and as such lack free will and the possibility of self-determination. In defence, whilst this may have been true of Foucault’s earlier work on subjectivity—that was heavily influenced by Nietzsche’s ‘death of the subject’ theory—it
is certainly not true of his latter writings, in which he considers the formation of subjectivity as a complex process by which ‘subjects’ actively craft and negotiate their identities (Danaher et al., 2000: 116-117). It is this latter view of Foucault’s to which I subscribe, and is summarized by Danaher, et al. (2000), who write that for Foucault:

Though we may be the effects of power relations, we are not helpless objects formed and moved by power, but individuals constituted as subjects by governmental practices of power and normalisation, and we can choose to respond to, or resist, these practices. (Danaher et al., 2000: 128)

Hence, in my view, the kind of liberatory ‘critical pedagogy’ I promote is certainly not one that is designed to “save the masses from their own stupidity”, but it is rather one that empowers students towards new critical ways of thinking, by positioning them to analyze and resist prevalent forms of ideological representation and subject positioning, and to “recognize their own power as individual and social agents” (Giroux, 2005: ¶33).

Post-research anxieties and limitations

Overall, I have been very pleased with the methodological and theoretical approach implemented in the production of this research text, and I feel validated by the richness of data in support of my key arguments. Personally, I have grown immeasurably during the course of this endeavour, and I feel confident that I have been able to make a substantive contribution to academic research. Yet, as Patton (2002) writes when he humorously quotes Halcolm’s Iron Laws of
Evaluation Research, “the complete analysis isn’t” (Patton, 2002: 431); and I realize clearly that various itching concerns will naturally exist upon completing a task as mammoth as a dissertation.

I may have struck upon fortune in the sense that my principal qualm with this text is exclusively ontological, in that I will forever feel a victim of the shackles of language and context, and as such I understand with a slight tinge of nihilistic melancholy that if there is any validity in constructivist thought and the associated paradigmatic influences that inform ‘the researcher I’, then this text can only ever be understood in terms of the social, historical, political and cultural discourses in which it was produced. Consequently, I feel cheated by the notion that alike any human subject, I am imprisoned by context, always; and perpetually speaking, this text, my life, my opinions and my arguments will reside as mere specks on the confusing labyrinth-esque timeline of human intellectual development. One implication of this is that if I were given the chance to write this dissertation in another space and time, it would never be, this dissertation.

Another implication of this ontological quandary is that I understand as the writer of this text that I am far from being the bearer of any absolute meaning, and furthermore, I have no power over the multiple meanings that may be made of this text by future readers. Martino (1993) gives some consideration to this problem, when he writes:

Despite the fact that researchers work to make certain positions available for readers and to produce a specific body of knowledge, readers’ positions in specific discourses will inevitably influence the readings that are produced of the data. In short, there is no definitive reading of a text—meanings are located in a dynamic network-field of intersecting discourses. (Martino, 1993: 136)
In addition, it is inevitable that my own subjectivity will alter immeasurably over time, due to my own development and changes in the fabric of the multiple discourses of knowledge that inform it. Hence, there is by no means any guarantee of the kinds of readings that even I will make of this text in years to come. As Foucault famously wrote, “do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same” (Foucault, 1972; cited in Danaher et al., 2000: 1). However, despite the obvious nihilism of these diversions of thought, I remain positive in the sense that such various concerns surely bind the minds of all writers and thinkers, and this ‘truth’ has not stopped a legion of writers before me contributing to the fabric of actual societal change. I guess I can only hope to affect as much influence as possible, within these seemingly immobile boundaries.

My second major post-research concern is that I feel often overwhelmed by the future task of being able to suitably reach and influence the minds and practices of real life teachers, who reside outside the walls of structured academic discourse. I have realized that I must now look beyond the dissertation itself, and towards the next task of making use of my research in a public context. Anxiety regarding this issue does not only concern the literal problem of finding avenues through which I can actually transmit ideas, but also the theoretical issue of how I will manage to connect with teachers once I find appropriate opportunities to be heard. As a result, I am currently contemplating the various ways I can begin to recapitulate the most pertinent issues of this dissertation for the delivery to ground-level practitioners who may reside far from academia.

My final significant anxiety is that despite harbouring hopes that many more educators can actively begin the move towards the achievement of the lofty ideals of critical pedagogical practice I have outlined herein, I am also firmly grounded by the knowledge that at the end of the day many English teachers will never come close to achieving even the rudimentary goals I have outlined, let alone any higher level goals. Reasons for this are seemingly endless and wide
reaching. For example, many teachers will never have access to information that calls for such change; many will have sufficient access yet may resist change due to being positioned in ideological opposition; many will reside in departments in which such practice is frowned upon and curtailed; many will try with gusto yet ultimately fall short of achievement; and many will misinterpret the theories, reasons and political motivations behind implementing such practice and ultimately end up engaging students in warped propaganda. In fact, ‘the list goes on…’ as to why the accomplishment of both the rudimentary and high-level aims I have outlined is extremely difficult, and I find this to be unerring at the best of times. I do, however, believe that this battle in which I am embroiled is most definitely worth fighting, and although at times it is difficult to reside in such an isolated ‘far left’ and ‘radical’ position when compared to the majority of my colleagues, I remain committed to this approach, as I firmly believe in its potential for broad reaching positive change. In some ways, I feel that the best result I can hope for from this dissertation is that I will be able to ‘touch’ even just a small number of educators and that these teachers will move to actively reflect upon their own practice, and will then try their best to enact change in their pedagogies. Then, if these few educators embrace and develop such practice, they may eventually influence their colleagues both at present and in the future, as well undeniably benefiting the many young people with whom they are professionally engaged.

In terms of any specific limitations that have arisen as a result of this research, I only have two minor concerns. Firstly, if pragmatic boundaries had allowed me the opportunity to expand my sample sizes in terms of both the quantity of students who completed the quantitative survey and the quantity of in-depth interview participants, I believe would have been able to achieve a more accurate overview of young people’s engagement with the various issues at hand. I would also have been privy to more diverse and detailed qualitative data that could have been used to better effect in my data analysis. For example, I recently found myself involved in a conversation about
my research with the 16-year-old—elite private school attending—son of a family friend, and many of his opinions were insightful, highly intelligent, and represented a remarkably critical voice that was missing in my sample. If added, his voice would have served to benefit this dissertation in many ways. However, on the other hand, I realize that just as my research lacks such critically mobile voices, it also lacks voices of the entirely opposite nature, such as the often incoherent and complicated opinions of my London pre-research students who appeared drenched in popular culture and concurrently blinded to the significance of its influence. Voices of students such as the London girls would have added a ‘shock factor’ to this dissertation that it currently lacks, and provided potent ammunition in support of the many negative ways that the ideologies of corporate-driven popular culture texts influence the subjectivities and everyday social experiences of young people. Furthermore, such voices would have highlighted just how critically illiterate many young people are in terms of negotiating popular culture’s influences. In sum, I now realize the extent to which my participating students are products of a typically middle-class Australia and its school system, and how their data resultantly fails to acknowledge the various extreme positions that young people inhabit on either side. I also realize that in global terms, a middle-class position is extremely privileged, and it would seem likely that far more young people inhabit spaces closer to the London girls than they do to the privately-educated minorities such as my family friend’s son. Yet at the end of the day, and despite these concerns, I remain positive that I have been able to work effectively in light of the tightly bound pragmatics of conducting non-funded small scale MEd research, and I realize that all and any future research in which I am involved will also be unavoidably controlled by such various and restrictive factors.

The second limitation to affect the course of this research process entirely concerns factors of time and stress, and I am sure that I am not the first post-graduate student to experience these troubles. Since initially enrolling in this MEd program in 2003, I have lived in three cities, two
countries, worked in six different full-time jobs, and continually written freelance for several major publications. As a result, both my personal and professional life has experienced a complicated turbulence that has undoubtedly informed the direction and form of this text. By no means do I seek sympathy, however, I do wish it to be recognized that such factors have made this dissertation journey sometimes painful and convoluted to the effect that at times I have even considered resigning the entire endeavour. Ultimately, however, time and devotion has proved there is an end in sight, and I now prefer to view the diversity of life experiences that have accompanied the production of this text to be fundamental to its nature as opposed to being entirely restrictive—endowing this text in an atypical richness that would no undoubtedly have lacked if I had produced this dissertation within the grounded context of one country, one city, one government, and informed by the experiences of merely one professional engagement.

A final (personal) thought…

These days when I look towards the future, I do so with a newfound sense of hope, and a strong belief in the potential of transformative change. This developing optimism is in considerable opposition to the various states of personal 'ideological annihilation' that accompanied my early 20s and the dark and demoralizing initial stages of exploration into my own subjectivity.

In all ways, the compilation of this dissertation has involved an arduous mental journey and has represented a significant juncture in the narrative of my life’s journey. It has signified bold new awakenings, polarized by feelings of both terror and exaltation. Moreover, it has confirmed many of the ideas over which I began to stew years ago. Through analyzing the data herein I have concurrently and symbolically ‘cleansed my soul’ and tied up many loose ends inside my head.
The voices of my students have reverberated with sharp insights that have allowed me to mobilize empowering processes of rationalizing various theoretical concepts, re-conceptualizing my own subjectivity and history, and hypothesizing ways that educators can move towards creating a more critically informed future. As such, I feel a great distance from the Dublin pub in which this research narrative began, when my head was a den of storm clouds and sharp-edged questions, and when my thoughts were dangerous to myself as they routinely disturbed the very fabric of my own self-perception and identity. Back then, nothing seemed stable and everything seemed to border the edge of reason.

Madness, it seems, has now gladly given way to a form of sagacity previously absent within my consciousness, and I have made some significant steps towards filling the various negative chasms in which I was previously engulfed. However, this has not been without fortitude, and this dissertation will forever be remembered as concomitant to the unsettling process of self-analysis and re-imagination that was required in order to arrive at this point of youthful clarity.

Above all, I realize that I owe this emerging clarity entirely to the power of language, knowledge and thought—forces which have allowed me to transform my own subjectivity under the gaze of a fresh critical model that has guided me to better understand my own position in terms of the many ideological forces that inform it. Previously, many of life’s meanings were merely alluring blurs of oil on canvas, in confusing shapes, tones and hues; rendering me consciously unaware and somnolent in a haze of corporatized dreaming. I have now discovered that possibilities do exist for authentically felt experiences beyond the paradigms of consumerism, and I feel charged with the duty to proliferate such knowledge and help plant the seeds of similar revolutionary potential within the minds of others. In a world in which our lives are increasingly engorged with and defined by the ideologies born of rampant global consumerism, I believe the time has come
for individuals all-over to mobilize their full intellectual potential towards engaging themselves in a politics of resistance to neoliberalism’s expanding capitalist empire (See McLaren, et al., 2004).

Language and discourse inform our reality and our truth, and in turn, our realities define our actions. Without the power to negotiate these realities, we are, I feel, only half there. I believe that through furthered knowledge and the subversion of our linguistic constructs we can begin to reclaim the many pastures that have been dried and burnt. These shackles are temporary—and that is why I will continue to fight for physical, mental and intellectual freedom.

I feel a change in the air, a revolution of sorts.

I am daunted, and compelled.

I seek new directions, new truths, and new ways of living.

May 2006.
References.


Hewitson, R. (1999). *Student voice through a critical pedagogy in the arts in an Anangu school: an examination of the ways in which, in an Anangu school setting, that an Arts environment of dance and drama can become a site for an exploration of critical pedagogy in an attempt to establish and nurture student voice*. PhD Theses. Flinders University of South Australia, 1999.


Appendix 1 - The Quantitative Survey.

Part 1 – *Talking about your pop-culture tastes...!*

1. **Frequency of intake:** Please **circle** the most accurate response…

1.1 I READ MAGAZINES…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.2 I SURF THE INTERNET…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.3 I LISTEN TO MUSIC…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.4 I WATCH MOVIES…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.5 I WATCH TV…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.6 I READ THE NEWSPAPER…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.7 I READ BOOKS (non-fiction, fiction and journals)…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1.8 I PLAY VIDEO GAMES…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVERY DAY</th>
<th>EVERY SECOND DAY</th>
<th>A FEW TIMES A WEEK</th>
<th>EVERY FEW WEEKS</th>
<th>RARELY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
2. **Listing your favourite pop-culture texts.**

Most teenagers have their favourite pop-culture texts – the one’s you buy or listen to or watch more than any others. So that I can get a feel for the types of texts you most often consume, make a list of them under the categories below. List your favourite in each category and briefly explain why. Then list five other favourites in that category – you do not need to offer an explanation for these.

List your responses below…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazines.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My favourite magazine is…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List 5 other favourite Magazines…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Internet.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My favourite website is…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List 5 other favourite websites…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Music.

My favourite band/artist is…

Why?

List 5 other favourite bands/artists…

Movies/Films.

My favourite movie/film is…

Why?

List 5 other favourite movies/films…
Television.

My favourite television program is…

Why?

List 5 other favourite TV programs…

Newspapers.

My favourite newspaper (or newspaper section) is…

Why?

List 5 other favourite newspapers (or lift out sections)…
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books (non-fiction, fiction and journals).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My favourite book is…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List 5 other favourite books…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video Games.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My favourite video game is…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List 5 other favourite video games…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. The influence of popular culture texts on your life.

This section asks you to answer some questions and write a few things about the influence that you think popular culture has on your life, the lives of your friends, and your shared lives at school. It asks you to write about the ways you think, act, talk and dress; and the possible influence that pop-culture has on these practices.

3.1 – Popular culture has a major influence on my life…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.2 – I am influenced by the trends and fashions of popular culture…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.3 – It is important to follow the trends and fashions that we see and read in popular culture texts…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.4 – I am influenced by the ideas and stereotypes in popular culture…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.5 – Most popular culture texts rely on advertising in order to survive…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.6 – The types of products advertised affect the types of stories, general content and articles in popular culture texts…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.7 – Advertisers and companies target teenagers through popular culture texts…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

3.8 – The products and brand names advertised in popular culture are very important in my life…

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Not Sure | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
3.9 – Popular Culture texts present a realistic depiction of our lives…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.10 – Popular culture texts exclude (or under-represent) many groups in society…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.11 – The images and stereotypes presented in popular culture can have a negative affect on society…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.12 – Within my friendship group, most of us share similar pop-culture interests/tastes…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.13 – The popular culture tastes of a person (e.g. music, clothes, movies, games) are important to consider when I decide if I want to be friends with someone…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3.14 – Do you consider yourself to be part of a subculture? (e.g. goth, punk, surf, skate, etc) Please circle the correct response…

YES / NO

3.15 – Can you think of any current trends (in popular culture) that influence the things you or your peers are doing or wearing at the moment – e.g. trends in clothing, certain slang, types of products? List these below…

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4. Your experiences with popular culture texts in subject ENGLISH.

This section will involve you writing about your experiences with pop-culture texts in subject English at school. It is designed to find out how much you learn about popular culture texts, how often you learn about them and how effective you think your teachers are at teaching them.

4.1 – How often do you analyse/study Magazines in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.2 – How often do you analyse/study Internet content and websites in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.3 – How often do you analyse/study Music texts in English? (e.g. Lyrics, songs, etc)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.4 – How often do you analyse/study Movie texts in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.5 – How often do you analyse/study Television texts in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.6 – How often do you analyse/study Newspaper texts in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.7 – How often do you analyse/study Books/Novels in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.8 – How often do you analyse/study Video Games in English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
4.9 – **Overall**, how often do you analyse/study popular culture texts in subject English?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Quite Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Not very often</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.10 – In English, students often study both traditional texts and popular culture texts. “Traditional” texts are generally considered to be those such as novels, poems, short stories, etc. Popular culture texts often studied in English include TV, Magazines, Films, and Music (lyric analysis etc).

a – As a percentage, how much of your time spent in **English** class is spent studying **traditional** texts? (e.g. 60% or 83% etc)

b – As a percentage, how much of your time spent in **English** class do you feel is spent studying **pop-culture** texts?

4.13 – If **you** could decide how much traditional and pop-culture texts should be studied – as a percentage – what percentage would you allocate to each?

Traditional =  
Pop-Culture =

4.14 – I enjoy studying **traditional** texts in English…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.15 – I enjoy studying **popular culture** texts in English…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.16 – It is important for students to study popular culture texts in English…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4.17 – **If you have** analyzed some popular culture texts in **English**, how good do you think your teacher was at teaching you about these types of texts?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Fairly Good</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Not So Good</th>
<th>Not good at all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
4.18 – Have there ever been any **traditional** text/s you have studied which you found were **NOT** relevant to your life at all? If so, please list and briefly explain why…

4.19 – Have there ever been any **pop-culture** text/s you have studied which you found were **NOT** relevant to your life at all? If so, please list and briefly explain why…

4.20 – Do you study **TEE** or **non-TEE** English?

- [ ] TEE
- [ ] Non-TEE

THE END 😊 THANKS!!

P.S - I will also be conducting research in the form of interviewing some students regarding similar issues to those in this survey. **If you would be happy** to be interviewed about these ideas, please tick the following box:

- [ ] YES
Appendix 2 - Semi-structured Interview Questions (Sample Guide).

Note: The sample questions below have been provided in order to give a general sense of the types of questions I used during the semi-structured qualitative interviews I conducted with my five case-study participants.

As you will note, the questions were organized to comply with the four-part structure of the quantitative survey.

I produced this 'sample guide' of questions prior to conducting the survey. Upon compiling the survey data and selecting the five case-study participants, I used these sample questions as a base from which to extrapolate when planning the specific individualized questions to ask each case-study participant.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: A SAMPLE GUIDE.

PART ONE & TWO - TALKING ABOUT YOUR POP-CULTURE TASTES...! & 'LISTING YOU FAVOURITE POP-CULTURE TEXTS'

*All of the questions in this section serve the purpose of gaining further insight into the reasons why participants pride certain texts over others, and to ascertain the reasons why their frequency of intake varies over different mediums.

1. Why do you think it is that you normally “consume” popular culture texts? Is it for enjoyment? Do they entertain? Do they give you a sense of belonging or excitement? Do they educate you about the world? Is it because your friends suggest you should? Etc.

2. Depending on the results, I will have researched the text interests of my interview subjects, and I will question them regarding the specific texts they consume, asking questions such as:
   - Can you talk to me about why it is you like to read magazine X?
   - Your music tastes all reflect a certain interest in X type of music, can you tell me why it is you like X type of music?
   - What is it about a film such as X that you find enjoyable?
   - Do the people that you hang out with (your friends) also play video games such as X?
   - You display a really strong interest in newspapers, whereas you haven’t listed any music interests: what is it about newspapers that make them more interesting to you than music?
   - Etc: The possibilities are endless, however, the motive of questioning is to find out why students like particular texts, how they engage with particular texts, and the importance they place upon these texts.

PART THREE - THE INFLUENCE OF POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS ON YOUR LIFE.

*Having gained data from the survey regarding participants' own perspectives on the affects of popular media on their lives, I hope to gain further knowledge in this area by asking students to give examples of texts they are influenced by, the reasons why they believe they are influenced by them, and asking students for real life examples of ways they have observed popular culture influencing their lives and the lives of their friends.
Questions MAY follow along the lines of:

1. You said in Section 3 that you “Strongly Agreed” that popular culture has a major influence on
your life – can you talk about the ways that you think it has this “major influence”?

2. You said that you agreed you were influenced by the trends of popular culture – what are some of these trends that you feel you are currently influenced by?

3. Why do you think it is “not important/important/etc” to follow the trends in popular culture?

4. You said you were influenced by the stereotypes in popular culture – what are some of these stereotypes that you identify with and are influenced by?

5. In the few questions that referred to advertising and its place in popular culture, you “strongly agreed” that texts rely on advertising to exist – can you explain this idea to me in more detail?

6. What sorts of products are commonly advertised in the types of texts that you read?

7. You agreed that companies “target” teenagers through pop-culture texts – can you talk about or give an example of ways that you think they do this?

8. You said that products and brand names “did not” play an important role in your life – can you talk about why they are not important to you?

9. You said that you “agreed” that popular culture texts presented a realistic depiction of our lives – can you explain why you think this is the case?

10. You said that you “agreed” that popular culture texts often exclude or under-represent many groups of people in society – can you think of some examples of this? Also: Why do you think these groups are underrepresented?

11. You said that the images in popular culture texts “can/cannot” have a negative affect on society – can you explain “and/or” give examples?

12. You said that within your friendship group, most of you shared similar pop-culture tastes – why do you think this is?

13. You said that the clothes and music tastes and general pop-culture tastes of a person were important when deciding whether or not you want to be friends with someone – can you talk a bit about why these things are important?

14. - You said in Question 3.14 that you felt you were part of a subculture – what subculture is it that you feel you fit into?
   - What do you think it means to be part of this subculture? For example, does it have any elements that represent what it means to be, say, “a punk, Goth, etc”?
   - Is it important for you to be a part of this subculture?
   - If so, why is it important to be a part of the subculture?

15. - Are there any types of products and clothing that you feel represent the type of subculture that you are a part of? Describe these for me...
   - Do you think it is possible for a person to still be a part of subculture X but not wear any of these types of clothing?
   - How important do you think clothing and brands are in defining different subcultures?
PART FOUR – YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH POPULAR CULTURE TEXTS AT SCHOOL.

*Again, like Parts 1 & 2, the line of questioning in this section will very much depend upon the data gained from the survey.

Questions may follow along the lines of:

1. Firstly, I will begin with questions that compare the Part One and Part Four survey data, such as:

   - In Part 1 you said that you read magazines quite a lot, whereas you said that you studied them “not very often”. Do you think you should study these texts more? Have you ever studied them before? If so, how did you find that experience? (VISA VERSA)

   OR

   - You display a pretty keen interest in video games, but you say that you’ve never analysed these in class before – Do you think that video games are a type of text that should be studied at school? Why/Why Not? Etc.

   OR

   - You said that you often study newspapers at school; when you do this, what aspects of newspaper analysis do you usually look at?

   ETC, ETC, ETC.

2. Regarding question 4.9 & 4.10 - If you answered “Not Very Often” and then “Rarely or Never”. Why do you think it is that you don’t learn much about these types of texts? (Or visa versa if the responses were opposite)

3. Regarding question 4.11 – You said that you think that in English you should spend around “50/50%” on pop-culture and traditional texts respectively – why is it that you think you should spend an “equal” amount of time on each type of text?

4. Do you think it is more useful to learn about traditional texts or pop-culture texts? Or do you think they are equally valuable? Please explain your answer.

5. Regarding 4.16 – You said that you think that it is “important/not important” for teachers to analyse popular culture texts with students in the classroom? Why/Why Not?

   - AND: Do you think that the subject English teaches you enough about these sorts of pop-culture texts? Explain.

6. Do you think that it is a good or bad thing for teachers to analyse traditional texts with students in the classroom? Why/Why Not?

   - AND: Do you think that the subject English teaches you enough about these sorts of traditional texts? Explain.

7. Regarding question 4.14 & 4.15 – You said that you enjoy studying “traditional/pop-culture” texts in English – can you explain to me what it is you like about studying these types of texts?

8. If you have studied some popular culture texts in class, please describe those which you have most enjoyed analysing and explain why?

9. Are there any other subjects at school, besides English, where you get the chance to study
popular culture texts?

10. In your opinion, do you think that English is the subject where popular culture texts should be studied, or do you think that these types of texts should remain only in subjects like Media?

11. Regarding question 4.17:
   - Based on your own experiences, how much do you feel that the English teachers you have had know enough about popular culture texts (including the texts you’ve studied)?
   - When you have studied popular culture texts in English, have the texts you’ve studied been up-to-date and relevant or out-of-date and irrelevant. Explain/Examples?
   - Do you think it is important for your English teachers to stay up-to-date with the latest pop-cultural trends, styles and tastes? Explain.
   - Do you think your teacher feels comfortable or enjoys teaching popular culture texts? What gives you this impression? What sort of knowledge does your teacher have of popular culture? Do you think they are up-to-date?

12. Imagine that the government decided to scrap the study of all traditional texts in English, such as classic novels and plays, traditional prose, poetry and drama. Is this a good or bad thing? Explain.

13. Do you think that you learn more about yourself and the world you live in through studying traditional texts or pop-culture texts? Explain.