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## 'Everyday Talk: Investigating Media Consumption and Identity Amongst School Children'

Particip@tions Volume 4, Issue 1 (May 2007)

### 'Everyday Talk: Investigation Media Consumption and Identity Amongst School Children'

#### Abstract

This paper refers to research investigating the significance of teen engagement with media and popular culture within the everyday environment of a multi-ethnic secondary school. Involved here is an interest in the formation and negotiation of the young informants' identities. It is argued that the social significance of media and popular culture can be explored by adopting an ethnographic research model that engages with everyday social interaction and social processes. A set of research methods is proposed for exploring the use value and symbolic value of media and popular culture for different teen consumers. The research model presented enables an investigation of everyday media use that extends beyond the focus on interaction between the text and the consumer commonly found in media consumption studies.

**Key words:** Media and popular culture consumption, identity, interaction, everyday life, media ethnography

#### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to propose a research model for exploring the use value and symbolic value of media and popular culture for different teen consumers, in relation to their everyday social interactions. The media and popular culture industries offer highly significant resources for the consumption-related activities of adolescents in Britain.<sup>[1]</sup> At the same time, this consumption is an important aspect of these young people's social relationships and, as such, is implicated in the continual process of identity formation. Much of the attention given to "identity" within Media Studies has focused on textual representations (of gender, class, ethnicity and so forth), fan group membership or cross-cultural comparisons of media markets. An alternative approach is to attend closely to the situated ecology of identity performance and perceive macro identities (gender, ethnicity, race, generation etc) as constructed and locally inflected in the practices associated with specific positions, in particular activities and interactional exchanges.<sup>[2]</sup>

The research from which this paper will be drawn investigates these issues within the everyday environment of a multi-ethnic secondary school. The project entitled *Urban*

*Classroom Culture and Interaction* (henceforth UCCI) asks: What kind of environment for identity formation emerges at the intersection of education, ethnicity & popular culture? How are educational, ethnic & popular-cultural affiliations negotiated in everyday practice? And how is this tied to biographical trajectories and wider stratification processes? (Rampton et al 2005). This three-year research project is at a relatively early stage and the emphasis of this paper is upon discussing, firstly, the methodological approach, which departs in certain ways from established research routes in media consumption studies and, secondly, the research methods employed. By also noting the aspects of media consumption that the proposed model does *not* engage with, it can be situated within the matrix of theoretical approaches found in this expanding field.

In a study of lessons in comprehensive schools preceding the one cited above, it was found that students engaged with popular culture approximately four times an hour, mostly in unofficial performances. Our survey of eighty-three hours of spontaneous interaction recorded in two multi-ethnic London schools identified 275 episodes where talk orients to - refers, alludes, performs - music, television, film, computers, electronic games, newspapers and magazines. [3] These episodes took different forms: references to textual content, allusions to style and also performance (with the singing of songs particularly common). And these references served a variety of purposes: peer alliances, relationships with teachers, involvement in and disaffection from curricular activities and negotiations of local power relations within the stratified ecology of the classroom (Rampton, Harris & Dover 2002).

As an illustration of a few of these social processes, the following research material from the earlier study refers to the talk of one teenage boy during a single sixty-minute audio recording of him in class:

*The scene:* A secondary comprehensive school in London. Fourteen year-old Hanif is sat next to Masud in a Built Environment class. The students are being relatively quiet and attending to the task of redesigning on paper their bedrooms. In the course of the lesson, Hanif initiates seven separate conversations with Masud and others around him that either refer to the content of media hardware and texts, or seem to involve performance of media references [4]:

1. Hanif and Masud talk about the new computer that Hanif has got at home. Masud is surprised that Hanif has just bought one so Hanif quickly explains that he had another PC before but it was a bit old so he now has a new faster one. He says he also plans to upgrade this computer even further. They discuss what games Hanif has (*Simcity, Doom, Incarta*).
2. Ten minutes later the two boys discuss what PC software they have at home.
3. Hanif (gently) takes the mickey out of Bains, a boy sitting near him, when he tries on his strong glasses and jokes in an American accent: 'Welcome to Bain's World!' – presumably referring here to the film *Wayne's World*.

4. Hanif had seen the film *Airforce 1* the day before and thought it was brilliant. He asks Masud if he has seen it but he hasn't and the conversation switches to a new topic.
5. When he makes a mistake in the class exercise, Hanif does an impression of Homer Simpson and refers to himself as Homer - thus identifying himself with the TV cartoon character.
6. Hanif and Masud talk about the film *Spawn* and say that they have heard it is worth seeing because it is scary.
7. Following on from his reference to the film *Spawn*, Hanif asks Masud if he has seen *Dark Skies* (a TV series on Sci-Fi Channel). Again, Masud has not seen it so the conversation switches.

Within this brief set of interactions, we can see a few examples of ways in which media products enter into everyday conversation, facilitating relationships and acting as symbolic markers of taste and identity. Furthermore, they are present in an environment that would seem to exclude the relevance of media texts. Here we have a school lesson that is not incorporating media as part of the curricular activity (although the question of where the students place their computers, televisions and so forth, within their bedroom designs was likely to have arisen), and yet the pupils' location within a mediated world is very much in evidence.

Similar kinds of research material are being generated by the current study, with the significant addition of considerable amounts of talk and also physical activity around the internet and mobile phones. The large scale of this second project will allow us to take the analysis further and we aim to offer a multi-layered view of these young people's consumption of media and popular culture. As in the previous project, the current research participants are avid consumers of a variety of media and popular culture products and in investigating consumption and identity, issues arising include: access to and preference for different media by young people of differing gender, ethnicity and tastes within specific locations. These things are explored through a combination of methods that will be discussed later in this paper, but central to our approach is the recording and examination of the spontaneous reproduction of media discourse outside the immediate contexts of reception/consumption (such as the examples cited above). This constructionist approach, with its focus on talk and social relationships, is influenced by symbolic interactionism and contributes to research that extends beyond media audience theory and attempts to understand life in a mediated world (Bird 2003, Moores 2000). The proposition of this paper is that the social significance of media and popular culture consumption can usefully be explored by adopting an ethnographic research model that engages with everyday social interaction. This model is, first of all, presented here in relation to existing media consumption research.

### **Audience Studies: the reader and the text**

Significant work has been produced within Media and Cultural Studies that considers the processes of media consumption within the context of everyday life (see, for example: Gillespie 1995, Livingstone 2002, Mackay 1997, Moores 2000, Morley 2000, Radway 1984, Silverstone 1994). Indeed, it has been recognised that media consumption involves interactive processes such as 'appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion' (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992), and that talk about media is central to displays of ownership, competence and taste (Barker and Brooks, 1998). This theoretical turn has been both crucial for the development of audience studies and also desirable for furthering our understanding of the complex ways in which media products have significance within our lives. However, there are relatively few empirical studies that actually focus on investigating these everyday processes, rather than simply acknowledging them as a sign of media engagement.

Perhaps not helped by the apparent lack of differentiation between Audience Studies and Media Consumption Studies, the focus of research in these areas has, in the past, overwhelmingly been on the interaction between the text and the consumer, or the text and a group of consumers located in the same reception space such as the household (Algan, 2003). In other words, audience studies have successfully looked at who is consuming what, and to some extent why and with whom but have paid relatively little empirical attention to social processes beyond the moment of textual encounter (even when the everyday context is considered). What about studying the broader experiences of everyday life in a mediated world: two colleagues chatting casually about a TV programme they both watched the night before; a school pupil's impersonation of a TV character during banter with friends, employed without reference to that programme (and often re-formulated to fit the moment); our use of text messages in maintaining friendships; the practical decisions we make that are informed by accumulated knowledge gained from the media; the ways in which we present aspects of our own media consumption to others as an indication of our tastes, our similarity and dissimilarity to themselves? And so forth. The many subtle ways in which media products are interwoven in our everyday lives is fascinating and could be highly significant.

The emphasis within Media and Cultural Studies on people's encounters with media texts is hardly surprising. It has framed the site of research (a great advantage in conducting empirical work) and has allowed theorists to claim conceptual space within the social sciences – space that is explicitly and physically media-related, rather than space already occupied by sociologists, anthropologists and others. But existing models of media consumption studies involve theoretical conventions that deserve critical attention. The persistent separation of production, text and consumption as areas to study makes sense in terms of the pragmatics of research but implies a linear relationship between the three: the producers create and market a text (within a particular economic and political framework); the text exists as an entity for analysis; consumers/readers/viewers make

(limited) choices in and interpretations of texts. As Peterson points out, 'Audience Studies, although shifting attention from texts to the processes and situations of their interpretation, have tended to reproduce this paradigm by putting the text and its interpretation at the centre of meaning making' (2005:136). This emphasis on issues of interpretation has been reflected in and compounded by the methods of asking people about texts.

With the rise of ICTs, media academics have become increasingly interested in media hardware as objects of study, as opposed to media content (Livingstone 2002:9). However, media technologies continue to be rarefied as textual objects, an approach consistent with the dominant paradigm cited above. Such attention to the materiality of media consumption and the 'double articulation' of media (Silverstone 1994:286) is a useful extension of Audience Studies. By extension, a perspective that could encourage a more holistic look at media consumption and re-production in everyday life would be 'an ethnographic approach that prioritizes the audience in its unique geographical, cultural and social environment, rather than the media text or genre' (Algan, 2003:25). In other words, the impetus becomes to conduct a media consumption ethnography, rather than an ethnographic reception study. A distinction is that the former 'take as their analytical point of departure a particular group of people, not a particular type of medium' (Drotner, 2000:172) and the (potentially messy) focus is on 'the kaleidoscope of daily life' (Radway 1988:366). Furthermore, a media ethnography 'attempts to tease out layers of meaning through observation of engagement with the everyday situations in which media are consumed, the practices by which media are interpreted, and the uses to which media are put' (Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005:2).

Before proposing ways of conducting media ethnographies, it is worth noting what kind of research approaches have been adopted within Youth Culture Studies, as the focus of my own research is on teenagers. Subcultural theory, and the subsequent strands of Post-subcultural theory, have usefully analysed young people's engagement with fashion and music and issues of class, gender and identity – via the concept of 'resistance' and its critique (see Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004). But Cultural Studies has tended to be informed by structuralist and post-structuralist theories that read youth styles as texts, paying little attention to the interactional components of dialogue at the level of everyday experience (Back 1996). In looking at young people's use of music to express identities and emotions in leisure, education and workplace locations, Dan Laughey's interactionist study incorporates 'theories of everyday life that work outside the orthodox neo-Marxist paradigm of effects and resistance [...] towards a paradigm of performance and enactment' (2006:3). This emphasis on interactive processes and the articulation of personal narratives (informed by the theories of Bakhtin and Goffman) is, he agrees with Back, 'scarcely evident in many youth cultural accounts' (11). There has also been insufficient attendance to the large and powerful youth culture industry (Osgerby 2004, Laughey 2006). Herein lie similarities with Media Consumption studies, even though there has been remarkably little dialogue between these two fields. [\[5\]](#)

## **Moving beyond Audience Studies: exploring the possibilities of media ethnography**

There is no doubt that the work done on audiences and consumption of texts has offered and will continue to offer many interesting and useful insights into issues of interpretation, processes of consumption and the social relationships involved in those processes. The move beyond Audience Studies that is followed here should produce studies that are supplementary to rather than replacements of those that have gone before. Through a broader engagement with everyday life, this 'third generation of studies' (Bird, 2003:4) will analyse other ways in which media is embedded in and reconstituted through everyday life and some of the consequences of living in a media world. This involves not only looking at people's physical uses of media hardware and texts but also their use of media as a resource for interaction and identities. In other words, such an approach engages with media as a cultural frame (Bird, 2003: 3). Within this cultural frame, or 'circuits of media culture' (Osgerby, 2004:6), media texts do of course remain significant but are not necessarily the pivotal concern of the researcher.

Before discussing the potential breadth (and limitations) of media ethnography, it is useful to consider what is meant here by "ethnography". Since the anthropologist Malinowski's pioneering study in the Trobriand Islands at the beginning of the last century, the central tenets of fieldwork (which is the prerequisite to writing an ethnography) have been living with subjects for a period long enough to generate understanding of "the native point of view", observation of the social/cultural life of "others" and attention to the details of the "everyday". However, the precise methods employed by ethnographers vary and the theories expounded have changed over time. How to view ethnography then? Is it a collection of different possible methods - a toolbox from which the ethnographer makes his/her selection (genealogy mapping for kinship studies; interviews for accounts of belief systems; observation of ceremonies)? Or is it more appropriate to think of the ethnographic approach as an ethos, a commitment to understanding the world through grounded experience? I believe it is both advantageous and possible to think of it in both ways. Ethnography is a methodology that stands out from others in its appreciation of everyday living, its empathy with others and the commitment to lengthy research. It should not be circumscribed but allowed to offer various methods for judicious use by the researcher. Conducted well, it is able to explore the minutiae of everyday life and, at the same time, engage with the broader social issues cross-cutting different people's experiences.

As an ambitious and, at times, ambiguous approach, ethnography has of course met with criticisms. Within Anthropology a "crisis of representation" gained ground in the 1980s with the publication of a number of critiques (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1988). The ways in which anthropologists assert their objective authority in written ethnographies and deny the subjective, power-laden nature of their relations with subjects came under critical attack, prompted by post-colonial and post-structural theory. A useful response to this debate has been the urge for the ethnographer to be more

reflexive - to incorporate into the study an acknowledgement of his/her own position within the research and the causal relationship between the research process and the findings generated.

It is ironic that just as anthropologists were in the midst of a heated debate as to the efficacy of ethnography, it was increasingly claimed as a means of research within Media and Cultural Studies. An ethnographic approach had previously been adopted by some media academics interested in the working practices of media professionals - in particular news journalists (see Gans, 1979, Schlesinger, 1987, Tunstall, 1971). However, it was within audience studies in the 1980s that "ethnography" as a methodology had particular impact. Whilst discussing their use of ethnography in studying domestic viewing habits, Morley and Silverstone claim that 'by its very nature, ethnography attempts to explicate the (often unspoken) informal logic of communication and other everyday practices' (1991:156). In a similar vein, Len Ang promotes her own use of ethnography in audience research when she describes ethnographic understanding as '... a form of interpretive knowing that purports to increase our sensitivity to the particular details of the ways in which people deal with television in their everyday lives' (1991: 165). Such statements signify the importance to these theorists of using ethnography to analyse the micro rather than the macro and, as Morley points out, 'the boom in ethnographic media audience research in the 1980s was, in part, the result of the critique of overly structuralist approaches, which had taken patterns of media consumption to be the always-ready-determined effect of some more fundamental structure' (1997:126).

In spite of the re-evaluation of ethnography that has taken place within Anthropology (which did not go unnoticed by its new users in Media and Cultural Studies), some anthropologists have criticised other academics for misappropriating the term ethnography. Their argument is that in the "new fieldwork", much greater credence has been placed on interviews at the expense of genuine participant-observation (Nugent & Shore 1997). This criticism has also arisen within Cultural Studies itself (see, for example, Gillespie 1995). As Baym points out, a further criticism of "ethnographic" audience research is that it overlooks the cultural whole (which is a purpose of ethnography) 'substituting instead conditions such as gender, class and ethnicity' (2000:18). Within our UCCI project, the interactionist perspective on identity adopted, combined with an observational ethnographic approach to research material gathering (using a combination of methods discussed later), should prohibit the viability of such short cuts.

Although the "field" within which we will be conducting our enquiry is a physically bounded site (ie, a school), the project needs to somehow acknowledge the cross-cutting influence of other areas of our subjects' lives: family, community, the media industry, and so forth. I will return later to discussing the limitations of our approach and the issues that we will not be able to directly encompass within our ethnography, but here I want to identify some of the political-economic factors that we will encounter that are both constituted within and, at the same time, frame the micro interactive processes that are

our primary focus. They are factors that are likely to be pertinent across all media ethnographies.

Firstly, globalisation processes in the production and consumption of media, as well as the diasporic movements of people can and should be recognised within ethnographies by researching at the level where global and local influences interact. Indeed, it is in studying how these seemingly macro-processes are manifested in an everyday context that they become discernible and understandable. By focusing on the interrelationship of “identities” with media consumption, the importance of locality is in no way diminished; the tastes, preferences and uses of consumption found amongst the research participants will reflect the individual’s cultural and financial capital and also his/her location in a north London school.<sup>[6]</sup>

As well as the global reach of many media products, another market factor to be considered is the increasing aestheticisation of consumer goods: the significance of advertising, design and brands (Osgerby 2004). Do the informants allude to the importance of these things in their displays of consumption? There has also been a multiplication of personally owned media – not least mobile media (Livingstone 2002). And any examination of media consumption also needs to recognize changes in media technology. For example, in comparing our earlier research material with that from the current project, a significant shift will be the conspicuous presence of mobile phones in the latter. Not only do phones have aesthetic, symbolic and use value as pieces of electronic hardware, they are also frequently used as props in negotiations of relationships (Katz & Aakhus 2002).

The young are a target market for many media products, even though they may have to rely on their parents’ cash to actually make a purchase. This makes the factors cited above particularly pertinent in studying young people’s uses of media and highlights the celebratory and also fearful public discourses that attend to these market changes and to this consumption (Barker & Petley 1996, Buckingham 1993, Haddon 1993). As Sefton-Green argues, ‘children (or youth) and new technology are terms which are often yoked together in discussions about the nature of social change, precisely because they both embody similar teleological assumptions about growth, progression and development which underpin late modern society’ (1998:1-2). Progress is not always considered to be positive, however; fearful discourses of moral decline have long been associated with both the music and fashion of youth culture and with young people’s consumption of media. These discourses, and also the configurations of “youth” that are manifest in media texts and media marketing, are all part of the circuits of media culture, and are evoked at particular moments by particular interest groups.

A critical methodological issue raised in relation to the points above, is the boundaries of any ethnography given the complex spatial and temporal interrelationships endlessly at play. According to Marcus, multi-sited ethnography is possible if it reveals the ‘chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence’ (1998:90). This involves re-conceptualising the “field” within which ethnography takes place and requires not only



placing any given research site within a historical, geographical and political context but also recognising the constant movements of people, ideas and objects (as well as the position of the ethnographer in relation to all of these things). Such an ambitious approach has for some time been evident within anthropological theory (see, for example, Clifford 1997, Hannerz 1992). And within media theory, the influence of Marcus et al can be seen - notably but not exclusively - in Bird's discussion of 'opportunistic ethnography' (2003), that investigates moments of cultural media interaction, and in Couldry's concept of 'passing ethnography', that is concerned with tracking the reproduction and legitimation of media power in everyday social processes, interaction and rhetoric (2003).

Media consumption ethnography does then involve the seemingly impossible task of multi-level analysis. It will never be feasible – or necessarily even desirable - to encompass all macro, industry factors (such as the range of media products available to our informants at any one time). However, the ethnographic task becomes more manageable if it is accepted that the political and the structural are manifested in and recreated through everyday social processes and interactions; that the global is only discernible through the local. In short, the macro resides within the micro (Couldry, 2000:197). Practical means of investigating some of the complex layers implicated will be discussed in relation to the proposed set of research methods, but I will first of all explore further the significance of everyday talk.

### **Media consumption, social interaction and intertextuality in everyday life**

As Shaun Moores points out, the media industry 'provides viewers and listeners with a constant "stream" of symbolic materials from which to fashion their senses of self' and 'this flow of images and sounds is creatively appropriated by social subjects as they seek to put together personal identities and lifestyles' (2000:139). Whilst I would argue that the concept of "lifestyle" should be complementary to - rather than a replacement of - older sociological concepts such as social class, I agree with Moores (and others such as Chaney 2002), that broadcasting and other areas of media and popular culture offer significant resources for everyday social interaction and act as markers of taste and identity. Implicated are the negotiation and/or confirmation of power relations between people within particular local settings.

A possible starting point, then, is to employ ethnographic methods to reveal and investigate moments of social interaction framed by media culture, such as those described briefly at the beginning of this paper. For, as Peterson argues:

Media intertextuality, the interweaving of bits and pieces of dialogue, actions, or other symbols from mass media texts into everyday speech and action [...] has much to teach us about how people attend to media texts and how media enter into the practices of everyday life (2005: 130).

Whilst intertextuality has been widely studied by media scholars as a characteristic of texts, much less attention has been given to its place as an interaction strategy. There is a growing body of academic work concerned with the on-line interaction of new media users, including some studies of the communication *about* media texts by fans in internet chat rooms (see, for example Baym 2000 and 2005). Attention has also been given to the modes of language used within print and broadcast texts and a few studies have gone on to consider 'the effect of the media on language' (Aitchison & Lewis 2003). However, the primary focus suggested here is not on identifying specific linguistic consequences of contact with media but on noting the significance of media within everyday identity performance and negotiation.<sup>[7]</sup>

In attempting to investigate the efficacy of media resources for confirming or renegotiating a person's status within different settings, the UCCI research project will draw upon socio-linguistic studies that recognise the co-existence of and inter-relationships between discourse (interactional) identities, situated (institutional) identities and transportable (latent) identities (Zimmerman, 1998). Following Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1984), it can be understood that the performer requires the knowledge of appropriate media culture references and how and when to utilise them. This knowledge is used strategically even if habitually and unreflexively. Equally, the audience requires the cultural knowledge to interpret these references (although meanings may not always be shared by speaker and listener). Peterson lists the five domains of intertextual action as: (i) intertextual performance – reproduction of media texts in social discourse, (ii) paratextual knowledge – the knowledge about media texts one brings to media reception and intertextual performance, (iii) architextual practice – interpretation of a text by recognising intertextual connections such as genre, (iv) metatextual discourse – discourse that comments on media texts and on people's textual practices, and (v) hypertextual production – the creation of new texts out of elements appropriated from media texts.

Although Peterson does not discuss this, it is also important to consider what media and popular culture the person has physical access to. Significant here are the issues of financial capital and market choice, as well as demographic factors: geographical location, household status, age, and so forth. Intertextual moments do offer a significant point of entry for investigating media consumption and identity but it is necessary to reach beyond such fleeting moments and connect them to the political-economic factors cited in the previous section, and also a broader profile of the subjects' engagement with media culture. This is achievable partly through the use of interviews and surveys but also through the collation of moments of media performance over a period of time. Here, the employment of ethnographic methods is key, for not only is the researcher engaged in interpretive analysis, attempting to understand other people's meanings (Geertz 1975), but is also seeking to understand a topic through the analysis of patterns of everyday processes. By taking an individual and a chronological period as one of the initial units of analysis, the researcher can consider what types of media references are repeated during that time, what variations are discernible in different situations and if there is a narrative coherence in the references made. Thus, we can

analyse the 'narratives of the self' (Giddens 1991; Finnegan 1997) and repeated 'repertoires' (Hermes 1995) that different people have the power to present within different institutional settings and the role of media references therein. To further explore the different layers of research suggested so far, I will present some of the aims and methods of the UCCI research project.

### **Developing research models: a case study**

As argued above, it is necessary to think about media consumption as in articulation with other areas of everyday life; consumption cannot be understood entirely in isolation. One means of exploring it is through opportunistic ethnography (Bird 2003), which focuses on moments of interaction where consumption is referred to. By having a multi-disciplinary research team (ranging across sociolinguistics, education, cultural and media studies) and by employing multi-level research techniques, the UCCI project should be able to offer empirical evidence of the meaning of media consumption at a level that truly encounters social relationships.

Our current ethnographic fieldwork involves a two-year case study of two classes in a multi-ethnic secondary school. We are focusing on a group of fourteen and fifteen year olds in a comprehensive in London, and are using participant-observation, radio-microphones (attached to our participants to gather live audio recordings) and also interviews to collect our research material. These methods produce an unusually intimate view of everyday life, and we will also draw on school, policy and media documents to set this research material in a wider context. Overall, analysis moves across micro-macro levels examining: interactions where the teachers or pupils orient to media and popular culture (and also ethnicity); the social distribution of popular cultural practices; the relationship between practices and their representation in local accounts and in curriculum and policy discourse (Rampton et al 2005)

The mix of methods applied in the project offers a layered understanding of the significance of popular culture consumption in our teenage participants' everyday interactions and social processes. This can be illustrated here by, firstly, comparing the types of research material that our different methods each provide and, secondly, by considering the accompanying issue of relations between the researcher and the researched. The focus here is on key empirical methods: (a) participant observation and the accumulation of fieldnotes (b) radio-microphone recordings of our main teenage informants during their participation in classes and break-time activities (each individual being recorded over a period of three days in each of the two phases of fieldwork), (c) playback interviews, wherein selected extracts from the radio-microphone recordings are replayed to the participants (and friends) to then record their comments and explanations, and (d) one-to-one interviews involving the researcher and each informant.<sup>[8]</sup>

Participant observation, and the writing of field notes by the project's research officer provides a view of the broader institutional processes, issues and incidents in the daily life of the school and also provides orienting descriptions and interpretations for the rest

of the research team. Overall, an emic sensibility is developed and 'thick description' (Geertz 1975) is enabled. In terms of facilitating relationships with research participants, this everyday presence of the researcher establishes and maintains institutional access and field relations and has enabled the identifying and enlisting of focal participants. Furthermore, the physical use of media hardware such as mobile phones can be observed. Whilst non-teaching professionals are familiar visitors within the school, the researchers' skills in developing and balancing relationships with the staff and with the students are vital here.

Key students have been selected to wear radio-microphones, with their parents' as well as their own permission. The researcher, listening through headphones, can discreetly stay within range and is not in close proximity to the informants unless invited by the students themselves. If informants want to conceal something it requires conscious effort on their part but they are free to switch off the microphone. In practice this rarely happens, not least because the confidentiality of all material recorded is assured. Some of our informants do probably, on occasion, perform for the microphone but, as with any method of empirical social research, the presence of the researcher inevitably impacts upon the area of research and this needs to be reflexively acknowledged in the analysis. Having said that, this method allows the researcher to act as a participant observer with an unusually intimate access to non-researcher-mediated interactions.

The work of listening through the extended recordings (ninety hours in the initial phase of fieldwork) is also a form of shareable mediated ethnography. Intertextual references and performative interactions will be analysed using methods of sociolinguistics, repeated repertoires and narratives will be searched for, and the research material as a whole will also be surveyed to produce quantitative research material about the frequency and range of different types of references to different types of media and popular culture by different individuals. This quantification allows some useful comparisons between boys and girls, between different school settings, and so forth, which can inform the understanding of individuals and also facilitate a broader view of teen media consumption.

As well as giving us access to the ways that different kinds of media/popular cultural practice and resource are interwoven in everyday social interaction in school, these recordings can, in conjunction with interviews, allow us to explore the relationship between self-report and action. Moreover, radio-microphone recordings provide insight into unofficial backstage talk not normally captured in research in schools or amongst young people more generally.

Playback interviews are a hybrid of radio-microphone recordings and interviewing, of "naturally occurring" primary research material and the participants' secondary accounts of these research material. The sessions encourage participants to assess and comment on aspects of their everyday life of particular interest to the project team. They also allow the researcher access to understanding some of the participants' sense-making devices and local theories, which may be surprising, puzzling or indeterminate. These sessions

allow the research informants greater involvement in the project by hearing the recordings of themselves and gaining further understanding of the researcher's areas of interest.

Semi-formal interviews, in contrast to the radio-microphone recordings, provide research material about issues that informants do not routinely talk about in everyday activity. They can provide a space for expression by student informants who normally keep quiet in radio-microphone recordings, and they can stimulate informants to think in new ways. Indeed, interview questions tend to generate accounts of a reflexive nature where normative expectations, moral judgements and self- and other- ascriptions are more frequent than in radio-microphone recordings and more explicitly phrased. This allows us to get some purchase on the wider discourses that the participants align themselves with or distance themselves from. Whereas the radio-microphones access research material on the interweaving of popular culture consumption within everyday interactions, interviews allow us to ask informants questions such as 'what/where/when/why do you consume' particular products of media and popular culture? These are basic concerns in media consumption studies and the information gained complements the research material from the audio recordings. Similarly, interviews allow us to get some purchase on informants' lives outside school, providing broader contextualisation. Informants temporarily control the disclosure of their everyday worlds in interviews although they do not have as much control of the topic agenda as they do during the radio-microphone recordings.

Interviews with staff, on the other hand, will be oriented to educational discourses and perceptions of students and classrooms and will be one means by which authoritative discourses surrounding the students can be explored. And an additional method to be employed will be the focus-group study of the interpretation of classroom interaction episodes among teachers/users. Whilst the student ethnography constitutes the project's main empirical activity, the investigation of teacher perceptions allows us to place the case study in a wider field and sharpens its sensitivity to user-perspectives. Other confirmatory or contradictory discourses emerging from documentary research material on the school, on curriculum and educational policy, and contemporaneous media accounts of schooling, ethnicity and popular culture, will also be considered (Rampton et al 2005).

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### **Reflections on the research model and further questions**

Before concluding, it is worth considering some of the issues that our research model will allude to but will not immediately offer empirical evidence of. Investigative methods beyond those cited above, would need to be employed – something that could be possible in future projects and can, of course, be found in other people's studies.

The absence of textual analysis from our primary research is, perhaps, the most obvious gap from a media studies perspective. It *will* be relevant to our survey to broadly categorise the media references (not least by mode of technology: television, music, electronic game, and so forth). And knowledge of genres (for example, different categories of music) will come into play when assessing our subjects' identity performances but this does not necessarily require detailed textual analysis. Crucially, our aim is not to categorise each individual as belonging to a particular lifestyle group (which would run counter to the interactionist perspective adopted) but to show the mechanics of how these young people's identities are continually worked upon with reference to media. As argued throughout, the emphasis is on investigating the role of media consumption in relation to other everyday processes, rather than on the relationship between text and consumer.

In a similar vein, we are not focusing primarily on the motivations for consumption of specific media, although our concern with the symbolic and use value of media goods will have implications for this area of enquiry. Studies investigating the desires that can drive consumption have emanated from both market research and psychoanalytical perspectives (see, for example, Belk et al 2003, Jagodzinski and Hipfl 2004). However, this focus is more easily applicable to the study of fans' and collectors' activities than to the often fleeting and diverse everyday interactional references made by our subjects.

As discussed previously, there are a number of political-economic issues that will be inflected in our investigation of micro social processes. It has been suggested that the UCCI project should encompass a survey of the media goods available to our subjects in order to tie their consumption more closely to an examination of the market. But, aside from the impossibility of achieving such an extensive task in any meaningful and accurate way, such information would not directly answer our research questions. As Laughey points out 'even if global media appear to dominate the agenda about what is available, co-present influences ultimately shape literacies and tastes' (2006:111). The comparison of our research findings with those of our earlier study (Rampton, Harris & Dover 2002) will enable a short-span historical comparison but a longer historical view would require finding similar studies from the past.

Our informants' own knowledge of the media industries raises interesting questions about media literacy. This topic deserves specific investigation that would be supplementary to our current line of inquiry. However, we will be directly concerned with the relationship between the students' media consumption and their engagement with the school curriculum, as well as with discourses circulating about education, youth and media.

The model presented here is not intended as a replacement for existing approaches within consumption or reception studies. But it does offer a supplementary approach that opens up additional avenues for exploring the importance of media in people's lives.

## Conclusion

A study of a school environment has important implications for educational research but is also relevant to Media and Cultural Studies. If investigating the lives of young people - and the role of media and popular culture within those lives - an important location to study is the school, where a large percentage of these young people's time is spent and where peer relations and issues of identity and development are played out.

All of our research methods reveal the constant and busy work done by our teenage informants in developing and performing narratives of the self and in judging others' identities (Giddens 1991, Finnegan 1997). The style of this identity-work depends upon the interactional setting (chat with friends, interview with researcher, and so forth), but the structures of stratification and affiliation that are active in and beyond the classroom are negotiated and reaffirmed partly through an individual's access to, taste in and display of consumption.

Whilst questions of who consumes what and when in relation to market possibilities, necessarily remain important in studies of consumption, there are also many questions to ask about what happens beyond the initial act of consumption – after the purchase of the item of clothing, the physical use of the media hardware, the listening to the song, and so forth. These acts are interwoven in everyday life and are culturally framed and there is much evidence of the significance of consumption within inter-personal interactions. Given the importance of media and popular culture for teenagers developing and performing identities, the social significance of media and popular culture consumption can be explored by adopting an ethnographic research model that engages with everyday social interaction. Particularly useful is a multi-layered, multi-method model, such as the one proposed here that explores consumption as a social and discursive process and focuses on situated, everyday activities both during and beyond the moment of consumption.

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[1] Consumption is considered here as a social activity with social meaning (Schor 2003)

[2] It can be recognised, for example, that ethnic identity claims are often indirect and multifarious, and are mediated and co-articulated with other macro-identities and by the relations and business at hand (Rampton 2003).

[3] An episode was defined as a sequence of talk introducing and often sustaining a media-cultural theme, bounded by periods of talk and activity devoted to other matters.

[4] The names of the informants have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

[5] 'The literature on youth subcultures has generally avoided any prolonged examination of media consumption because of its concerns to analyse subversive practices that are opposed to the ideological functions of media productions' (Laughey 2006:4).

[6] For a discussion of the importance of locality in relation to young people's cultural consumption, see Bennett 2000.

[7] The intricacies of speech and language will be something that the socio-linguist members of our research team can focus on and this is one of the benefits of having a large multi-disciplinary project. The approach presented within this article is intended to speak to Media and Cultural Studies audiences and so does not *necessarily* invoke such close attendance to issues of linguistics.

[8] The discussion of methods presented here is derived from collaborative work by the research team.

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