IDENTITY FORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: The influence of the media on the formation of identity

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Declaration

Submitted in fulfilment / partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of masters
in Social Science, in the Graduate Programme in Psychology,
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Durban, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and
borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of
masters in Social Science, in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social
Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. None of the present work
has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores identity formation in contemporary society, through investigating the influence of the media on identity formation. The focus is on identity and what people attribute from the media as defining their view of themselves and their world. Seven people aged 25 to 35 years participated in individual, semi-structured interviews, specifically focusing on the participants' media usage in their leisure time. The analysis revealed that the participants' tendency to position themselves as agents that were immune to the media's influence was reflective of the ideological discourse of the 'self-contained' individual. Evidently, the participants were unaware of the way(s) in which they had been interpellated to behave as subjects of an individual kind. The prevailing ideological discourse of individualism was challenged by highlighting the contradictions in the participants' accounts. The analysis further confirmed that identity formation is a dynamic and contradictory process, and unavoidably shaped (even constituted by) history, culture, politics, and ideology.

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

This focus of this research study was on identity formation, in particular, this study explored how middle class South Africans gave an account of the ways in which their leisure-time media usage influenced their identity. In this sense this study was not primarily concerned with the influence or effects of the media, but rather the focus was on *identity* and what individuals attribute from the media as defining their identification process. As Wasserman (2005) asserts, current debates should not just be about the effects of the media on identity, as identities are also constructed in the process of discussions and debates about the media itself.

Thus, in this research study the media served as a window through which the complexities of identity construction could be investigated. It was also noted that any research on the media invariably opened itself up to a vast amount of media forms, such as TV, DVDs, cell phones and so on. Since one of the objectives of the study was to establish which media forms appealed to the participants in their leisure time and why, the media was intentionally left open as a broad, generalisable scheme.

The subject of 'identity' was chosen due to an on-going curiosity in addressing questions such as 'who am I?' and 'how do we come to be the way we are?' Although preliminary readings revealed that the concept of identity has been debated for centuries, Hall (1996) argues that in recent years, "there has been a veritable explosion around the concept of 'identity'" (p. 15). Bauman (2000) suggests that the current "obsession with identity discourse" reflects that the problems of identity are not as simple as they used to be. "Indeed, the acquiring of identity has become problematic: a task, a struggle, a quest" (p. 27).

As Hayes and Maré (1992) contend, identity formation in contemporary society is far more fluid, fragmented, unstable and contradictory than previously suggested. A variety of subject positions or social roles are drawn upon and negotiated which are dependent on historical and social setting (Hayes & Maré, 1992). This is particularly relevant to post-apartheid South Africa, where the transition to democracy in 1994 brought about changes in social relations and power balances that challenged the identity groupings of apartheid. Moreover, with the 1994 transition, South Africa re-entered the international arena after years of isolation. Identities are

now renegotiated within the nation itself, and its prevailing culture, but also within the broader global arena of "cultural pluralism" (Wasserman, 2005, p. 51).

Today, the media is arguably one of the major social processes in the construction of identity. We spend vast amounts of time watching DVDs, TV, reading newspapers and magazines. These media forms shape our understanding and knowledge of the world and our individual values (Sardar & van Loon, 2000.) Teer-Tomaselli and Tomaselli (2001, cited in Wasserman, 2005, p, 123) argues that "Since the end of apartheid, South African media has acted both as a site of transformation and as an instrument of transformation, as it encourages the proliferation of ideas, new ways of thinking and construction of post apartheid identities." Given the pervasive nature of the media, and the insidious way it is inserted into our day-to-day lives, there are times that we are not aware that it is socialising us, shaping our experiences and views of the world.

Positioned within the broader field of poststructuralism and postmodernism, this research study examined identity construction and the media through a critical social theoretical lens. Critical social theorists are interested in capitalist structures of oppression, and how these structures construct individuals that are the subjects of capitalism. They recognise that social processes such as the media that inform our identity are never neutral. Instead, critical social theorists argue that the media plays a significant role in producing certain ideologically loaded views of the world. More specifically, the media assists in the construction of individuals that are subjects of capitalism (Calhoun, 1996).

Hence, Calhoun (1996) asserts that "People make and inscribe history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing" (p. 56). This introduces the notion of 'subjectivity,' how we are constituted as subjects, and the processes by which we come to be a person. Barker (1999) explains: "As persons we are 'subject to' social processes which bring us into being as 'subjects for' ourselves and others" (p. 165). The notion of subjectivity stands in contrast to the dominant Western claims that there is a fixed, stable identity that resides deep within each person. This research study challenges the Western ideological discourse of the 'self-contained' individual, wherein the individual is considered largely separate from society. In contrast it is argued that identity is relational, dynamic, and processural, and unavoidably shaped (even constituted by) certain historically situated, ideological discourses (Hayes, 1984,

cited in Hook, 2004). It became apparent that there was a shift in the question from 'who am I?' to 'How have I been constructed?' (Collins, 2004, p. 8).

When discussing identity and the media in terms of ideological construction(s), we recognise that this relationship is not a neutral process, but rather it is an ongoing process in which people are called or ideologically interpellated to behave in certain ways. As Fay (1996, p. 131) argues, ideologies "mislead" people, resulting in people systematically misunderstanding their own behaviour.

By exposing the contradictions and ambivalences in people's accounts - analysing what people *mean* when they talk about the influence of certain social processes like the media on their lives, and the actual *effects* that the media has on their lives - it is possible to expose the ideology of individualism and the powerful role that ideology and power play in the formation of their identity. Fay (1996, p. 131) explains that by understanding the "mechanisms by which people become subject to ideologies," which are often hidden from people themselves, it is possible to challenge the basic 'taken-for-granted' assumptions we make about identity formation and the influence of social processes, such as the media on the identification process.

CHAPTER TWO – THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of identity is an age-old, eternal problem that philosophers have been grappling with for centuries. To quote MaalhoUf (2000), "Identity has been a fundamental question of philosophy from Socrates' 'Know thyself!' through countless other masters down to Freud" (p. 9). However, over the years, one of the major problems in the social sciences has been how to theoretically and conceptually tackle the issue of the identity, or more specifically, how to address the complex interplay between identity and the social world.

According to Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge (1998), perhaps such difficulties have arisen due to the tendency of the social sciences to view the self as independent from social and contextual factors – as a 'self-contained' individual - a stance, which until recently, has dominated Western thought. Billington et al. (1998) note that for Westerners, the ideological assertion of the self-contained individual is a "very seductive seemingly 'natural' way of thinking and of experiencing 'ourselves.' The self-contained individual is a powerful myth, central to the way we experience our self and our relationships ..." (p. 42).

Drawing on a number of theoretical and conceptual angles, this literature review challenges the ideological discourse of 'self-contained' individualism. There is no essential or unique core, but rather identities are shaped and produced by culture in specific times and places. As Barker (1999) writes: "Identities are not things that exist [...] they are made rather than found" (p. 13). Identity is operationally defined as the "knowledge and understanding that *social actors* have of who they we are and how they interact and relate to others in their group or society" (Billington, et al., 1998, p. 249).

The adoption of an inter-disciplinary framework is consistent with the broader philosophical approach referred to as postmodernism. Postmodernism challenges the notion that overarching theories and explanations are able to provide universal answers to human concerns, instead it encourages the use of "small-scale theories" and "more subjective and experiential accounts of the social world" (Billington et al., 1998, p. 253). Mkhize (2004) adds that today, grand-

narratives, or theoretical "blueprints cast in stone" are rejected due to their tendency to reflect and support the dominant interests in society (p. 423).

First, critical social theory challenges the 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about the nature of identity formation, and provides a critical analysis of how the media assists in the construction of individuals that are subjects of capitalism. Second, media theories contribute to our understanding of how Debord's (1995) 'spectacle' and Kellner's (2003) 'megaspectacle' appeal to people, or attract their attention, ultimately provoking them into viewing the world in particular ways. Third, identity theories demonstrate that identity is relational, dynamic, negotiable, and processural. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory (SIT) contributes to our understanding of identity demonstrating that identity is largely produced as a result of group membership, coupled with a drive to develop positive self-esteem.

Critical Social Theory

Critical social theory refers to a succession of ideas that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. Founded by a group of German intellectuals (referred to as the Frankfurt School), the purpose of the group was to establish a critical analysis of the effects of capitalist structures on social relations. As a philosophical, radical revision of Western Marxism, strongly opposed to capitalism in the West and Stalinism in the East (Van Zoonen, 1994), the Frankfurt School sought to expose the structures which bred conformism and hindered the exposure of underlying tensions, contradictions, and possible action. They considered themselves non-conformists, dedicated to individual uniqueness, independence, creativity, emancipation, and social change (Calhoun, 1996).

Over the years, ideas stemming from the Frankfurt School have been built on and reinterpreted by a number of cultural and social theorists, resulting in the theoretical position known as critical social theory. As a form of inquiry, critical social theorists are interested in examining the *effects* that certain historical, economic, political, and social arrangements have on individual identities and society as a whole. Such analyses are rooted in exposing the relations of power and politics that are prevalent in the construction of personal and collective identities. Thus, the word 'critical' is used in the Marxist sense where *critique* means to understand in order to bring about change (Hayes, 2004).

Ngwenyama and Lee (1997, p.1) affirm:

> "For critical social theorists, the responsibility of the researcher in the social situation does not end with the development of sound explanations and understandings of it, but must extend to a critique of unjust and inequitable conditions of the situation from which people require emancipation."

Critical social theorists consider the media to be a powerful way of sustaining the capitalist system and binding people to oppressive structures. As far back as the Frankfurt school days, the media, referred to as a 'culture industry,' was seen as a powerful force that dumbed the masses, lessened resistance, and sustained relations of power by popularising certain types of culture (Van Zoon, 2000). In light of the ever-increasing advances in media technology and the pervasive nature of the media in people's day-to-day lives, critical social theorists have become increasingly concerned at people's growing dependence on the mass media and how it assists in the production of subjects of capitalism (Calhoun, 1996).

Although there is no one definition of critical social theory, historical and present day versions of this theoretical framework share a number of fundamental beliefs (Mohammed, 2006). From the onset that critical social theorists maintain that the production of knowledge (including the sciences) can never be unproblematically objective, decontextualised and ahistorical. Hence, critical social theorists reject traditional Western approaches which seek objective knowledge. Theory is never neutral, and all research is unavoidably shaped by culture, politics, and history. This includes the recognition that *all* theorists - including critical social theorists - involved in the production of knowledge, are influenced by their own historicity and culture. Collins (2004) maintains: "All explanations are interpretations – those that deny this by making claims to universal scientific truth are made more dangerous by their attempt to hide their own perspective" (p. 2).

Critical social theorists further maintain that theories and knowledge produced by the social sciences play a significant role in the everyday life of ordinary people, shaping the way in which people experience themselves and their world. As Collins (2004) asserts, theories about the world "do not simply interpret the world, they also construct it … [theories] do not simply describe universal truths about human nature but produce systems of thought that become true" (p. 6). In short, theories are effective in shaping our understanding of ourselves. Thus, one of

the primary objectives of critical social theory is to critically examine how knowledge about social life is constructed. Included in this analysis is how social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances inform the development of knowledge (Mohammed, 2006).

In terms of this research study, the implication is that theories and knowledge produced around identity formation and the social world occur within a particular socio-political and historical context (often serving a particular agenda). According to Billington et al. (1998), the formation of the 'self-contained' individual is rooted in the emergence of (capitalist) property relations in the nineteenth-century, and the philosophy of Enlightenment in the seventeenth to the eighteenth-century, which promoted notions of the rational, self-directed individual. The ideological discourse of (self-contained) individualism has filtered into everyday discourse, influencing how we talk about ourselves and experience ourselves. In Tuffin's (2005) words: "the ideology of individualism is important in constructing that self" (p. 142). Moreover, a significant portion of the academic literature concerning the relationship between the self and society, that is, the media, has primarily been from an individualistic perspective.

Critical social theory challenges the dominant Western ideological assertion of the 'self-contained' individual, which views the individual as separate and existing prior to the social world, and the social world as external or separate and not residing in the individual. Furthermore, critical social theorists reject the Western essentialist perspective, which argues that from birth there is a unique, stable, and 'essential core' residing deep within the individual. In contrast, critical social theorists recognise the social nature of people, that is, social life is a product of *intersubjective* relations or shared meanings with others (Billington, 1998, et al.).

In adopting a non-essentialist position, critical social theorists assert that identity is dynamic, multiple, and profoundly affected by social, cultural and historical processes (Billington, 1998, et al.). Hence, the word 'subject' is used in preference to 'self,' the subject is considered "decentred, produced socially, in relationships through the systems of meaning within language and culture" (Billington et al., 1998, p. 53).

Today's academic literature largely accepts the non-essentialist point of view, as Powers (2001) notes: "When judged against the benchmark of practical experience, an ever-changing view of identity seems more viable" (p. 7). Moreover, Collins (2004) argues that the danger of essentialism is that it tends to explain socially constructed 'ways of being' as natural and inevitable, which in turn makes 'these ways of being' difficult to dispute and transform.

It is important to emphasise that critical social theory does not view the individual as predominantly a product of society. It moves beyond making sense of people's social circumstances (a classical Marxists perspective), or obtaining an in-depth account of the uniqueness of people's day-to-day lives (a phenomenological or existentialist perspective). Rather, critical social theory focuses on both situating people's day-to-day experiences within the wider social and political context, and providing a critical examination of the dialectical relationship between the individual and the social.

Dialectics, a Marxist concept, shows how things are interrelated: the individual is deeply embedded in the structures of society, influencing society and in turn being influenced by society. Dialectics is not simply a case of relationality, but shows how interrelationships involve systems of power which are often beyond the control of the individual (Collins, 2004). Thus, making sense of the people's everyday experiences is not simply "a case of *adding* social context to our conception of the individual, but realising how individuals are formed in particular historical, social and cultural contexts, are *integral* parts of their social worlds, and if abstractly removed from these contexts they lose their individuality" (Hayes, 2004, p. 176).

Critical social theory views the ordinariness of people's everyday life and people's ability to reflect on their experiences as important and to be taken seriously (Hayes, 2004). Such research about people's ordinary day-to-day life enables us to see the world from different angles - to think about it in a different way. This helps us to challenge 'taken-for-granted' assumptions we make about ourselves and our world, which in turn helps to expose possible structures of oppression.

This type of research is particularly valuable given that we are "creatures who exist fully in our social relations with others, we can never see our identities altogether directly; they inhere in the many-sided relations of our lives and actions to those of others," and hence our identities are "not knowable simply through internal reflection" (Calhoun, 1995, p.2). Elkin's words add further insight:

> "We are unable to consciously observe or examine our identity formation or sense of self as it is an ongoing process, taking place mostly beneath our notice from day to day - and indeed physiologically, moment by moment. We can never catch ourselves in the act of becoming ourselves; there is always a gap or rupture that divides us from the knowledge that we seek" (Elkin, cited in Crossley, 2000, p. 2).

A distinctive and characteristic feature of critical social theory is the insertion of politics, ideology, and relations of power into psychology and the social sciences. This stands in contrast to mainstream theories, which for the most part, have claimed political neutrality and objectivity. Hayes (2003) notes: "Psychology is, and historically has been, one of the most resistant of all the social sciences to the 'contamination' of politics" (p. 2). By seeking where politics and ideology are at play, we are able to access the meaning and experience of people's lives and the ever increasingly stresses they face in modern capitalist society themselves. Thus, as Hayes (2004) notes, critical social theorists, rooted in Marxism, are particularly concerned with the "psychological effects of living particular lives as subjects of capitalist societies" (p. 164).

According to critical social theory, humans by nature tend to pursue happiness and pleasure, and desire harmony with others. However, the nature of capitalist society and the ever-increasing influence of the media "pose demands against Eros, against nature" (Calhoun, 1996, p. 18). In broad oversimplified terms, under capitalism, people find it extremely hard to experience life as happy and meaningful, which leads to feelings of alienation. The media serves to reinforce capitalist ideological discourses and distract and divert the individual's attention away from their ever-increasing experience of alienation. The goal of the critical social theorist is to attempt to expose and analyse the tensions and contradictions that emerge, both between people and their environment, and within people (Hayes, 2004).

Primarily, modern day psychology has focused on adjusting people to their current circumstances in order to achieve mental and emotional well being, rather than encouraging people to question and challenge their hostile circumstances, in search of a better existence and quality of life (Calhoun, 1995). Thus, Collins (2004) argues that "The Marxist notion of alienation provides a conceptual link between subjectively experienced crises (which psychology likes to pathologise as purely internal matters), and social forces that brutalise people" (p.7). Given that life under capitalism is largely experienced as alienating and meaningless, a pressing and logical question remains: why do people not recognise their own unhappiness and set about challenging these oppressive current circumstances?

In Eagleton's (1991) view, "The study of ideology is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness" (p. xiii). Reiss (1997) writes that ideology is the "immensely complex dialectical exchange relationship between ideas and society. The two co-exist and interact. It is a two-way process – dialectic" (p. 15).

As previously mentioned, in capitalist societies, unjust, exploitative conditions give rise to certain problems, contradictions, and tensions. In an attempt to make sense of these social contradictions, and in order to conceal the prevailing oppressive conditions, ideological thinking and practices emerge which serve to legitimate and justify the dominant capitalist interests. In other words, ideology "misleads" people into accepting the dominant system unquestionably. Ideology within Marxism can therefore be defined as, "a set of social practices, ideas and meanings that obscure – or more accurately *attempt* to obscure and conceal – social contradictions" (Hayes, 2003. p. 172).

According to Billington et al. (1998), Althusser's theory of ideology plays a significant role in understanding how ideologies - as an arrangement of symbolic representations - operate by structuring consciousness and personal identities, and how power relationships are (re)produced by the construction of 'subjects.' Although the complexities and intricacies of Althusser's arguments are beyond the scope of this research study, his seminal essay on 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' affords two important insights that are pertinent to this study.

Firstly, Althusser (1971) asserted that ideological thinking and practices result in us living our social relations in an *imaginary* way. Secondly, his concept of *interpellation* describes how people are recruited as subjects of ideology, thus creating subjects of an *individual* kind.

Althusser (1971) maintains that due to the increasing complexities and tensions in modern society, ideologies emerge which provide individuals with more explicit and systematic ways of navigating their lives. This symbolic map, or 'ideological map,' is an imaginary map or model of their social world. Billington et al. (1998) explain that these 'ideological maps' enable us to recognise ourselves as men, women, South African, and so on: "We see ourselves and the rest of the world through these categories and it is difficult to think or feel outside of them" (p. 32).

It is important to note that Althusser's (1971) concept of 'imaginary' does not refer to 'non-real' but to an 'image.' In other words, people have an image of themselves - or more accurately - people imagine themselves to be something other than what they are. In this sense ideology is not about seeing the truthfulness or falsity of social reality. Rather, ideology refers to *self*-misrecognition which arises as a result of the indispensable imaginary dimension of human life (Eagleton, 1991).

According to Althusser (1971), the image of the unified, coherent self is reflected back to us by the dominant ideology. When faced with the dominant ideology of the coherent self, the individual moves away from his/her actual state of existence - namely the decentred individual - in search of a more harmonious and reassuring image of him/herself, that of the centred, coherent individual. Once the individual has submitted to this dominant ideology, or the ideology of coherent self has been internalised, we start to act it out spontaneously and without question ... "all by ourselves" ... without the need for coercive control (Althusser, 1971, cited in Eagleton, 1991, p. 146). It is this unfortunate condition that results in us misrecognising our autonomy and free will (Eagleton, 1991). This provides an explanation for why people experience their identity as coming from inside themselves. Thus, people are *constructed* by society although it *appears* that their identity has been individually chosen (Foster, 1991).

For Althusser (1971), in spite of the misery that capitalism causes and the ongoing exploitation it perpetuates, capitalist ideology persists due to the action of the state. The state operates in two ways a) it enforces order through a number of 'repressive state apparatus' such as the police or military and, b) by means of a number of 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISAs), such as family, churches, government, schools, and the media. For Althusser (1971), ISAs are extremely powerful and effective forms of social control whereby people are managed and manipulated, and to ensure that people 'consent' to and are 'willingly' shaped as subjects of capitalism (Althusser, 1971, cited in Mkhize, 2004).

Through ISAs, modern capitalist society interpellates us - hailing or calling us – to act as subjects that are self-aware and make conscious, rational choices. Althusser (1971) writes, "Experience shows that practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognises that it is really him being hailed" (Althusser, 1971, cited in Eagleton, 1991, p. 145, sic). The media is a powerful ISA which reflects back to us prevailing norms or standards, such as the prevailing image of the individual in control of his/her life (Mkhize, 2004). In this sense the media is said to interpellate us as subjects of capitalism, facilitating or limiting our capacity to act relationally, determining our thoughts, behaviours, values and needs (Wilbraham, 2004a).

Ideology is not a defined set of principles that guide our behaviour, but rather instead it is an overarching and pervading 'superstructure' - "a set of images, symbols and occasionally concepts which we 'live' at an unconscious level" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 49). As Althusser's assertion, "in ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence." In this sense ideology is "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971, cited in Eagleton, 1991, p, 142). This presumes that identity is a '*real*' relation in terms of social relations and practices, and an '*imaginary*' lived relation. In other words, identity has a real, concrete material existence, and an imaginary and ideological dimension.

Ideology is composed of apparatuses and practices. It is in the way we speak, write, our habits, and the rituals we perform, which shape our thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions about the world. Hence, we can never remove ourselves from ideological thinking and practices, as it is impossible to have a society void of language and cultural practices. Ideology will always be part of society, and thus an inevitable part of our lives and (Crossley, 2000).

Although Althusser's (1971) theory on ideology offers important insights into the construction of identity, his theory has been criticised for adopting an overdetermined view of individual agency or subjectivity, that is to say, his theory does not account for people's ability to overcome certain ideological positions. Fay's (1996) discussion of *agency* offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of ideology, as he acknowledges people's ability to challenge, reject, and transform moral codes and cultural meanings.

For Fay (1996), ideology is what leads people to systematically misunderstand their own actions and wants. He writes: " [e]ven ideal members of society may systematically misunderstand their own motives, wants, values and action, as well as the nature of their social order, and these misunderstandings may underlie and sustain irrational forms of social interaction" (Fay, 1996, p. 127). Ideology is thus the systematic way in which we misinterpret or misrecognise social life. As a result, Fay (1996) argues that we cannot rely entirely on what people *mean* when they talk about the influence of certain social processes like the media on their lives. Instead, he suggests that one of the ways of accessing more accurate accounts from individuals, is to look at the *effects* that media has on their lives.

In this sense, Fay (1996) adopts a poststructuralist approach, which argues that there are multiple layers of social reality, or more accurately, that there is a distinction between *appearance* and *reality*. That is, beyond the 'surface' or *appearance* of reality lies another reality. Classic structuralist approaches encourage us to move beyond appearance or 'surface' level meanings in an attempt to expose the hidden more 'real' and 'truthful' meanings, whilst poststructuralist approaches encourage us to not dismiss or ignore surface level meanings. That is, we cannot presume that surface level meanings are uneventful and not 'real,' but rather we must look critically at, and take seriously, the way the world is produced superficially, creating an environment in which identities are formed. Therefore, critical social theory considers

surface narratives or meanings as important and worthy of analysis. Besides, surface level meanings, or manifest content frequently provide a hint to deeper meanings, or latent content.

Fay (1996) maintains that if we are to access a deeper understanding of peoples' accounts of the media and the ways in which it shapes their identity, we must critically examine both the manifest content, (surface level meanings), and latent content (deeper level meanings), exposing contradictions, tensions, and ambivalences.

The power of ideology lies in its tendency to conflate the 'social' with the 'natural.' By ensuring that the dominant structures *appear* natural and normal, which is frequently achieved under the auspices of 'scientific' thought, god-given or idyllic, the 'real' exploitative or unjust conditions are concealed (Eagleton, 1991). For instance, people's increasing tendency to engage with media forms in their leisure time and partake in a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption, are considered natural and inevitable – as 'second nature' - rather than a product of history. The implication is that people experience their current reality as a worldview that they have chosen for themselves. However, as Marxists note, the appearance of this reality as the only reality is illusory in an ideological sense, as reality reflects or represents dominant capitalist interests in society (Hayes, 2004).

In light of mainstream psychology's penchant for naturalising and normalising people's experiences and social realities, ideology-critique is a powerful analytical tool that exposes false beliefs and assumptions that people hold about existing arrangements (Hayes, 2004). Ideology-critique is not simply another attempt to understand and explain the nature of social reality, but rather the aim of its analyses is to bring about social transformation and emancipation.

Hence, unlike traditional social theories, critical social theory is both an analysis of contradictions and a transformative critique that explores the taken-for-granted ways in which the world is spoken about and organised. It challenges the 'giveness' of the world by analysing how things have come to be the way they are, and what they could be like in the future. As Calhoun (1996) asserts, by engaging constructively in the social world, critical social theory "seeks to explore the ways in which our categories of thought reduce our freedom by occluding recognition of what could be" (p. xviii).

Media Theories

Although the literature reveals that the extent and nature of the media's influence on individuals is a popular and highly disputed topic of which there is a vast amount of knowledge and theories, the common thread that has emerged from most sources is that the media is central to our everyday lives. Many media theorists argue that today's society is a media saturated society as the media permeates all aspects of our lives, shaping our thoughts, our actions, shaping our hopes, desires and fears (Van Zoonen, 1994). The growing concern is that due to the proliferation of media images, people's relations between each other and with the world are becoming more and more mediated, influencing and shaping people's lives at profound levels (Kellner, 2003).

The increasing presence of the media in our everyday life has been particularly noticeable over the last decade. Media technologies and media images are becoming more powerful and widespread than ever before. Through technology, media images are able to reach various parts of the world within seconds, as seen in the dramatic images of 9/11. We consume these packaged versions of events and issues on a daily basis. As a result, the media is said to increasingly shape and determine our values and beliefs, influencing our understanding of the world, and knowledge about world events.

According to McLuhan (1967), who referred to the media as the *'Gentle Giant,'* the pervasive and seductive nature meant that it was nearly impossible for ordinary people to recognise the way in which the media and media technology influenced the nature of social interactions and personal experiences. McLuhan's (1967) major contribution to our understanding of the media and its influence on identity was his claim that the introduction of new forms of media into

society, in particular electronic media, have dislocated tradition, culture, and society, and thus changed the nature of social interactions and altering personal and collective identity. In this way he argued that the media medium, as opposed to the content of the media message influenced individuals and society; hence his well-known slogan '*the medium is the message.*' Prior to McLuhan's (1967) work, media theorists had primarily focused on exploring the *content* of the media messages, thus overlooking the ways in which different media forms (such as the radio, the TV, the Internet, and so on) resulted in different ways of conceptualising and interacting in the world.

In a similar vein, Meyrowitz (1985) asserts that the media has changed the "situational geography" of everyday life (p. 308). We no longer have to be physically present to be part of experiences and events: "Wherever one is now – at home, at work, or in the car – one may be in touch and tuned-in" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 308). This re-arrangement in social settings influences social interactions, which in turn alters social roles and what society deems appropriate behaviour. Gradually the line between public and private lives is obscured; behaviour that was previously considered private is now largely accessible. As we continue to link ourselves to the outside world via the media, we internalise the external behaviours and norms of others. These behaviours do not simply educate us about how others live, but change the nature of our social landscape (Meyrowitz, 1985).

The notion that the media strongly influences our daily interactions, and mediates our experiences of the world and our social interactions, invariably elicits the highly contentious debate around representation, particularly political representation. According to Stewart, Lavelle and Kowaltzke (2001), "The media do not present reality; they re-present it…[a] media presentation is a depiction, a likeness, or a constructed image of something in real life" (p. 8). The media is not the equivalent of lived experiences, but is made up of a selection of experiences; at best media images show or present a 'selection of reality' or 'edited highlights.' In other words, the media can never offer us a direct presentation of reality; it *re-presents* the world to us, frequently adding a sensational spin to attract audiences. The more we see media re-presentations, the more they are perceived as natural and normal (Stewart et al., 2001).

Silverstone (1999) encourages us to understand the media as a process that is essentially and perpetually social. This implies that the media is historically specific, that is, it is constantly and rapidly changing over time. For instance, in contemporary society one of the major avenues through which the media appeals to people is through the entertainment and leisure industries. According to Silverstone (1999), media technologies such as TVs, cell phones, the Internet, and personal computers are not solely used for the purpose of information. Instead, media technologies have become major sources of entertainment, amusement, and communication; they are both "objects of mass consumption and essential tools for the conduct of everyday life" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 4).

Similarly, Morley (1992) warns us against viewing the media as a form of entertainment and amusement in our leisure-time. The media and media technologies do not merely provide people with an opportunity to relax and unwind or remove oneself from the social rules and constraints of the public realm into one's own private realm, but rather, today, leisure has become a commodity, influencing how and what people should consume.

According to Kellner's (1994) reading of Baudrillard, there has been a rupture between modern and postmodern society, which in turn has changed the nature of social reality. Modern societies, which were centred on production and consumption, have been replaced by postmodern societies which are organised around consumption, technology, and media images, and signs. The consumption of these images is arguably the new form of social control and domination. Thus, the postmodern world is a society trapped in images, spectacles and simulacra, a world of *hyperreality* whereby media information and communication technologies offer us experiences that are far more exciting and appealing than our everyday life. As Baudrillard states: "In an attempt to escape the desert of the real for the ecstasies of hyperreality, postmodern society shifts people further and further away from external everyday political and social reality" (Baudrillard, cited in Kellner, 1994, p. 8).

In a similar way, Debord's (1995) seminal work, 'Society of the Spectacle,' maintains that society is predominantly organised around the production and consumption of images, dramatic events, and commodities. The 'spectacle,' which is largely seen through the entertainment and service industries, leisure, and consumption, refers to a series of dazzling,

attention-grabbing images that offer us a world that is more exciting than the world we live in. Events are increasingly dramatised and sensationalised in order to achieve specific objectives and provoke people into viewing the world in particular ways.

The spectacle does not simply offer us a series of (mis)representations or deceptive images. Sensationalised images that are 'bigger and better' and more thrilling than the world we live in, are positioned as 'real' representations of the world, as accurate depictions of events and experiences, rather than *representations* of reality. Hence, the media has become a reality unto itself that is inserted into our culture and functions as though it were 'real.' When the spectacle appears to people as the 'real' objective world, it conceals its impact on personal experiences and social interactions (Debord, 1995).

Like Baudrillard, Debord (1995) maintains that the transformation from a society of commodities to a society of images or 'spectacles' is a powerful means of social control as people consume the "fabricated world," a world produced by others rather than themselves, restricting people's critical consciousness and creativity (p. 47). Hence, for Debord (1995), the root of the spectacle is power, as the spectacle supports the dominant interests and capitalist mode of production (Debord, 1995).

Kellner (2003), who expanded on Debord's work, argues that since the world has undergone a remarkable technological revolution, media images, or 'megaspectacles,' as Kellner (2003) calls them, aided by new technologies, are more dazzling, hi-tech and spectacular than ever before. Media culture, dominated by megaspectacles, has extended its wares to include not only the entertainment industries, but currently plays a central role in structuring the economy, politics, sports, education, and culture. The megaspectacle increasingly permeates every aspect of our lives, and has become a mode through which social relations and personal experiences are lived and understood (Kellner, 2003).

In opposition to the Althusserian view which asserts that "ideological texts interpellate subjects into subject positions that are homogeneous, unified and untroubled," Kellner (1992) claims that subject positions of popular culture are "highly specific, contradictory, fragile, and subject to rapid reconstruction and transformation" (p.149). The megaspectacle offers us images and

ideas that we can identify with and emulate. Seductive images of high-consumption lifestyles, fashion icons, celebrities, and tabloid journalism dictate what is 'real' and important, mediating how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others (Kellner, 2003). Fashion icons, celebrities, television, and the Internet provide us with images of 'correct' identity such as models of masculinity and femininity, overtly indicating desirable and undesirable behaviours – what we should value and believe in. These images of high-consumption lifestyles are so prolific in contemporary society that we hardly notice their influence on our lives (Kellner, 2003).

Kellner (1984), using Marcuse's (1964) ideas, asserts that under capitalism a new society was emerging; a society void of creative expression and individuality. Capitalist societies reduced imagination and freedom of thought, ultimately resulting in a 'one-dimensional man' and 'one-dimensional' society. Media and entertainment businesses manipulated people's free time and socialised them into accepting the dominant capitalist ideology and way of life. The individual was no longer in control of his/her destiny, rather she or he was subject to the process of domination.

Kellner (1984), in reference to Marcuse's (1964) work, claims that the consumption of commodities in capitalist societies has altered the structure of the personality. In other words, the ideology of consumption and the media has changed people's desires, values, beliefs, and behaviours. People see themselves or their identity as reflected in commodities, or as Marcuse wrote, "people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home and kitchen equipment" (Marcuse, 1964, cited in Kellner, 1984, p. 243).

Berger's (1972) notion of advertising and consumerism provides valuable insight into the ways in which publicity and advertising appeal to people and shape their identity. The constant message media advertising sends us is that we can meet our desire for pleasure and happiness by transforming ourselves into something better. This transformation is achieved through the purchase of certain products. In this way advertising makes sure that our happiness and future pleasure is decided externally.

For Berger (1972), the motivation to transform oneself is produced by presenting us with images that show us people who have been transformed. Advertising thus evokes a variety of feelings: *dissatisfaction* with one's present life; *anxiety* and *fear* that one will end up with nothing, and *sexuality;* and *envy* for those who have been transformed, and of the image of ourselves as we might be. Hence Berger's (1972) contention that "The individual is forced to live the contradiction between what he *is* and what he would *like to be"* (p. 145, sic).

According to Kellner (2003), megaspectacles produced by the media distract people from concrete everyday concerns: "People pay more attention to media produced spectacles than pressing concerns in the socio-political world and everyday life" (p. 20). This tendency to divert away from socio-political issues is evident in the synergies between the entertainment and information industries where the line between entertainment and information is increasingly blurred. For Kellner (2003), such synergies have produced a novel form of information society, or what he refers to as an "infotainment" society.

According to Kellner (2003), the concentration and massive development of "infotainment" industries can potentially significantly influence how people perceive their world. For instance, the news is no longer merely a form of accessing information about our world, but is increasingly sensationalised, hi-tech images which are designed to make an emotional impact so as to attract audience attention. The major concern being that in spite of this shift towards more sensationalised news coverage, it is still depicted to us as 'truthful' and factual. In other words, when we perceive the news as accurate and factually-based, there is a tendency to conceal its ideological content (Kellner, 2003). The news does not offer us neutral, objective information about the world. Instead, it provides people with ideological values and worldviews that impact on social activity. For Fiske and Hartley (2003), the news sells us particular ways of "thinking and talking about the world" and plays a significant role in how people construct their reality (p. 99).

According to Kellner (2003), the megaspectacle, which offers dazzling and seductive images or versions of reality, is an effective tool of socialisation and enculturation. That is to say, beyond these glamorous and glitzy megaspectacles are multiple sites of meaning, many subject positions, and exceptionally contradictory ideological concerns that serve to integrate the

individual into dominant capitalist economy of consumption. Hence, for this purposes of this study, a critique of the megaspectacle was a useful way of appraising how the media contributed to the formation of identity, how it shaped people's sense of self, their interactions and their social world. Kellner (2003) writes: "The megaspectacle offers insights into the fragmentation, reconstruction and fragility of identity in contemporary culture and how identities are constructed through the incorporation of subject positions offered for emulation by popular culture" (p. 149).

Identity Theories

Preliminary readings of the literature revealed that identity formation in contemporary society is increasingly, fluid, unstable, and contradictory. The 'self' has no fixed boundaries; it is not a coherent entity, but always in the process of being created and recreated and emerges as a result of self-reflexive interaction with others. Consequently, the erroneous paradigm of the 'self-contained' individual is replaced with the contention that people are social agents who act in relation to a number of intricate social networks. A variety of *subject positions* or social roles are drawn upon and negotiated, which are dependent on our historical and social settings (Hayes & Maré, 1992).

This more dynamic, self-reflexive, and personal view of identity stands in contrast to identity in traditional societies, which according to folklore and anthropological studies, was far more fixed, stable and unchanging - one was born into certain predefined roles. With the emergence of the principles of individualism and equality-for-all, many of these hierarchical structures were removed. As one moves away from tradition, one becomes more aware of the available social roles and possibilities. Kellner (1992) states: "One can choose and make – and then remake – one's identity as fashion and lifetime possibilities change and expend" (p. 142). However, this modern experience is coupled with anxiety, as in 'choosing' one's identity one is never sure that one has chosen the right identity or one's 'true' identity, or if one even has a coherent identity (Bauman, 2000).

Billington et al. (1998) remind us that although most modern psychotherapy is largely focused on saving the 'repressed' or 'true' self from the shackles of society, paradoxically our sense of identity is also confirmed by the relationships we have with others and our social world.

Billington et al. (1998) affirm: "The more we seek the inner core or true self, the more we find our culture with its expectations and patterns deeply embedded" (p. 41).

According to Hayes and Maré (1992), in contemporary society, people are constituted by multiple identities. That is, people enter into a number of relations within society, such as mother, teacher, and daughter, which are dominant at certain times and under certain conditions. In light of the way in which social reality is constructed in postmodern society, wherein multiple identities are part of the everyday human experience, the shift between multiple identities is far smoother than before, which leads us to "live the contradictions inherent in our multiple identity formation" (Hayes & Mare, 1992, p. 16).

However, multiple identities are more prominent under certain conditions. That is, due to the increasing pressures of modern living, and as old sources of identity formation are no longer adequate and fall away, identity formation in modern society is rendered more fragile and unstable. So, although there are elements of uniformity and stability to identity construction, it is particularly at times of crisis when contradictions and tensions in our subject positions become more noticeable, thus making people more susceptible to other identities (Hayes & Maré, 1992).

Frosh (1991) argues that although the notion of diversity may appear exciting, the uncertainty of who one is or who one is to become can also result in anxiety. Hence, in modern society, as people become distraught in their quest for meaning and fulfillment they are increasingly alienated (Frosh, 1991, cited in Hayes & Mare, 1992). In the face of such distress, difference is perceived as threatening and homogeneity is viewed as desirable. Thus, struggles for identity increase "anxieties of difference" (Hayes & Maré, 1992, p. 16).

This introduces the concept of difference into the concept of identity formation. The notion of a relationship between identity formation and 'difference' adds an important contribution to our understanding of human behaviour. For Hall (1996), identity rests on dynamic transformation and difference. Hall (1996) writes:

> "... identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourse, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation ... " (p. 4).

For Hall (1996), identification involves an interactive social process – a process of on-going transformation - wherein identity is constructed through the relation to the other 'other,' more importantly, through relation to what one is not. We construct our identity within multiple contradictory and conflicting discourses which are structured along the lines of difference, as opposed to sameness.

Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory (SIT), developed in the 1970s, adopts a social psychological understanding of intergroup relations and the social self (Tuffin, 2005). SIT holds that identity is largely produced as a result of membership to certain groups and a need to develop a positive self-image. In this sense, SIT offers a highly social account of identity, that is, it maintains that a significant amount on one's self concept is derived from our group membership (Tajfel, 1981). However, SIT also assumes that the individual has both personal identity (unique from others), and social identity (concepts of oneself as a group member) (Tuffin, 2005). Although SIT was not specifically designed to explain the relationship between identity and the media, particular aspects of this theory are useful in enhancing our understanding of how (and why) people develop their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Powers, 2001).

In order to make sense of the intricacies of social identity theory, the three tenets of this theory - categorisation, identification, and comparison - must be discussed individually. First, *categorisation* helps us simplify the complexities in the world by categorising people into different groups, or 'types,' whether it be by 'race' or gender or age. These socially constructed

categories, inform us about who we are (self-definition) and who others are. Differences within the group (in-group) are played down, whilst differences with other groups (out-groups) are emphasised (McGarty, Haslam, Hutchinson & Turner, 1994). Often the dimensions or categories by which people categorise themselves and others are based on ideological beliefs that have been constructed in order to fulfill the drive for positive self-identification. Media are powerful vehicles for the transmission of such ideologies, as social identities are maintained and strengthened through what people see, hear and read about in the media (Mastro, 2003).

Second, *identification* involves seeing oneself as both a unique individual, and as part of a group. Depending on the situation, there are times that we see ourselves as being part of a group (social identity), whilst at other times we see ourselves as a distinctive unique individual (personal identity) (Tuffin, 2005). This aspect of SIT provides a level of depth to understanding the construction of identity.

Comparison, the third and final aspect of social identity theory, which is linked to identification, maintains that in order to evaluate ourselves we compare our opinions and abilities with the opinions and abilities of others, thereby viewing our own group as better than others (Tajfel, 1981). In this way, individual self-esteem is linked to group self-esteem. Thus, for one to feel good about oneself, it is important to feel good about the one's social or group identity (Tuffin, 2005). Comparison does not only look at how individuals interact, but how groups, or collectives, interact.

Fay (1996) adopts an interesting view of the notion of identity and difference. According to Fay (1996), the social sciences have been plagued by dichotomous thinking, which he argues has been particularly noticeable in discussions concerning the relation between the self and the other, and the associated topic of the relation between sameness and difference. On the one side, there has been a tendency to overemphasise difference – the uniqueness of individuals – and underemphasise what is shared. According to this viewpoint referred to as atomism, society consists of unique individuals, and thus any understanding of society requires an analysis of the individual. This overstates the power of agency and neglects that the "individual needs others to be who they are" (p. 224).

On the other side, although the viewpoint referred to as holism recognises the way in which culture and society enable and constrain, it takes this too far neglecting the role of agency. Fay (1996) contends, it would be naïve to assume that society simply "makes us what we are" (p. 70) ... "We are not just products of a process which stamps out people the way a cookie-cutter produces cookies" (p. 68). This would negate the element of human agency or intentionality, namely the mindful, conscious and reflective nature of people. We do not simply mimic social and cultural processes, but rather we actively engage with these processes. Thus, socialisation and enculturation involves an on-going process of appropriation.

Fay (1996) introduces the concept of interactionism, a viewpoint which he argues has been absent from the social sciences. For Fay (1996), the identity of the self is tied up with its relation to others. The self is inherently social as our thoughts, values, and experiences are influenced by our interactions with others, our culture, and social histories. Only through interacting with others do we come to learn and understand about who we are – how we are unique and different from others? Identity is shaped by the way(s) in which we are different from others.

Hence, Fay (1996) argues that identity and difference are mutually necessary for each other – dialectically interconnected - as opposed to antagonistic categories. Our understanding of others is deeply entwined with our understanding ourselves. For Fay (1996), interactionism provides an alternative to dichotomous thinking as it offers a more dynamic, interactive, and processural relationship of the relation between the self and the other. Interactionism rejects that the self and the other are essentially fixed. Instead it "insists that the identity of the self is intimately bound up with the identity of the other (and vice versa), that the self and other are constantly in flux, and that they are both similar as well as different" (Fay, 1996, p. 233). In this sense, Fay (1996) maintains that it is not a question of whether we make our culture and society, *or* whether they make us, but rather "we both make our culture and society and they in turn shape us" (p. 70).

In concluding the literature review a number of common ideas emerged from the different theories and concepts discussed. First, identities are constructed and constituted through on-going interactions with others and our social, cultural and historical environment. Identity is relational, negotiable, dynamic, and processural. Second, identity construction is not a neutral process, but rather people are ideologically interpellated to behave in particular ways. That is, people are shaped, or constituted by ideological discourses. Third, the media, one of the major social processes that shapes and influences the dissemination of ideas, and thus significant resource in the construction of identity, supports and maintains dominant ideologies, and assists in the construction of individuals that are subjects of capitalism. These three points, positioned within their broader conceptual framework, provide a firm foundation on which to examine people's account of the media and its influence on their identity.

CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Located within the broader framework of interpretive theory, this qualitative study viewed the researcher as playing an integral role in the interpretive process (Denzin, 2001). Qualitative researchers maintain that it is impossible to observe and describe human experiences in an objective and impartial way. Instead, qualitative researchers acknowledge that the researcher makes a number of subjective choices, assumptions, and interpretations throughout the research study process (Wilbraham, 2004b). Wilbraham (2004b) reiterates that any attempt to make sense of the world is always partial or biased, as it is influenced by our own preconceptions and "by various 'theories' we have in our minds already" (p.1).

The interpretive researcher is aware that it is impossible to have direct access to people's experiences, or their 'reality' as it is "mediated by symbolic representations, by narrative texts, and by television and cinematic structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world" (Denzin, 2001, p. x). Therefore, the way we make sense of people's experiences is to study how people represent their experiences to other people and themselves, or as Denzin (2001) writes, "through the way the stories are told" (p. 59).

Thus a key feature of all interpretive methods is the importance that is placed on people's ordinary everyday lived experiences, and the meanings that people give to these everyday experiences. Significance is placed on understanding people's day-to-day beliefs, as these beliefs hold meanings that people use when interacting in the social world (Neuman, 1997). Since the interpretive approach addresses the practical everydayness of ordinary people's lives, it is a method that is well suited to this study which explores everyday media consumption and identity formation.

The interpretive approach considers social life as a result of social interactions and an arrangement of socially constructed meanings. Through social interaction, people produce shifting and flexible systems of meaning, thus the claim that there is no absolute truth, but rather a number of perspectives or multiple realities (Neuman, 1997). Whether a social action is considered meaningful, depends on the personal meaning that people attach to that action. In this way, identity formation and media consumption can be viewed as a "socially meaningful

action" (Donnelly, 2002, p. 47). Through the process of social interaction, and listening to the participants' everyday accounts of the media, using their "ordinary language and expression," we are able to gain a deeper understanding of their experience and the social world in which we live (Kelly & Terre Blanche, 1999, p. 123).

According to interpretive methods, when attempting to make sense of human experience, we must understand the social and historical backdrop which shapes behaviour. In other words, people's experiences must be contextualised, or rather "recontextualised," wherein the text (or personal story) is re-positioned within the individual's social and historical context (Kelly & Terre Blanche, 1999, p. 125). Interpretive researchers use the method of *verstehen* (understanding), or 'empathy' wherein the researcher tries to "imagine and try to understand the texts in their contexts" (Kelly & Terre Blanche, 1999, p. 125). Denzin (2001) reminds us that this process of contextualisation must be extended to the researcher: "The qualitative researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world. Rather, the researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied" (p. 3).

By and large, interpretive research is viewed as a creative process, which includes the subjectivity of both the researcher and the participant. It involves an intersubjective interaction between the researcher and the participant and the world in which they live, giving rise to new insights and new understandings (Wilbraham, 2004b). The researcher is encouraged to read beyond the surface of what the participants say - to read between the lines. He or she does not simply describe the participants' experiences, but added insight and sense to their meanings and experiences (Wilbraham, 2004b). Accordingly, interpreting and making sense of the participants' accounts entailed hearing what the participants *said* and *did not say* (Powers, 2001). Wilbraham (2004b) explains that through the process of interpretation "something is added to the participants' accounts ... [t]hat abstracts it to another level of insight that the participants themselves could not have achieved alone" (p. 3).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used for this study, a sampling technique used in qualitative research in which the researcher chooses the sample on the basis of known characteristics or experiences (Neuman, 1997). The participants were 7 highly literate, English-speaking, middle class South Africans who ranged in age from 25 to 35. As a qualitative research study, rich, in-depth descriptions were anticipated, and hence a smaller number of participants was adequate. The age group 25 to 35 was chosen as it was anticipated that the participants would have established certain routines in terms of their leisure-time media habits. Furthermore, participants were selected who were middle class, all working and from a higher income group, as they were more likely to have access to (and make use of) a variety of media forms in their leisure.

Due to widespread exposure to the media, finding participants for this study was fairly straightforward. Participants were obtained via personal social network systems. In other words, people were referred to the researcher, who in turn referred the researcher to other people, that is, the snowball method. Using this referral method to obtain participants (as opposed to obtaining strangers) was beneficial in that there was already a sense of trust and ease at the onset of the interviews. Furthermore, being in the participants' age category, the researcher felt that there would be a greater sense of familiarity and identification between the interviewer and the interviewees.

The participants were from the Gauteng region as this is where the researcher currently resides. All participants were middle class South Africans. Of the 7 participants interviewed, 3 were women and 4 were men. Although there was no particular criteria in terms of gender, this study reflected a fairly even gender distribution. This ensured that both men's and women's unique experiences were accounted for. All the participants' were white, except for 1 male participant who was black. Once again, there were no particular criteria in terms of race groupings.

Interview Process

In order to provide a degree of familiarity and ease with the interviewing process, a pilot interview was conducted and practiced with a relative. Thereafter, all 7 participants were interviewed individually, twice each, over a 3 month period. The interviews were conducted

using a semi-structured interview guide, wherein similar questions were posed to each subject (See Appendix 1). The interview questions largely centred around two primary themes that were determined by the researcher, namely what media forms appealed to the participants and why, and the influence the media had on their lives. These questions provided a framework in terms of the direction in which the interview would proceed, rather than a set of defined questions that all needed answering. By adopting this approach, the interview was able to proceed in a conversational, natural way (Denzin, 2001).

The first interview was a preliminary interview which (a) introduced the topic of discussion to the participants, (b) established the participants' media preference(s), such as the Internet, TV, Radio and so on, and, (c) established their media habits, that is, how often they accessed their preferred media form(s), and for how long. This provided an indication as to the influence of the media on the participants' leisure-time.

Moreover, in light of the vast range of media forms available, questions regarding the participants' *preferred* media form(s) served to narrow down their field of focus and prevent confusion during the interview discussion. The use of media habits in the participants 'leisure-time' was another way to focus the research. It also introduced the notion of 'choice' and free-time for the participants, which may have been lacking from media consumption in work hours.

The first interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, and served as an 'ice-breaker' for the more in-depth and probing questions that were to follow in the second interview. The objective of the second interview was to gather in-depth accounts of the participants' experience of the media. The second interview took place approximately a week later and lasted between 35 to 90 minutes. The rationale behind a week's break between the two interviews was that the first interview provided the participants with an opportunity to become more aware or conscious of their media habits over the course of the week, hopefully extracting more reflective descriptions.

Participants were individually contacted by phone and a convenient interview time was arranged. As the interview was audio-taped, it was important that the interview was conducted in a place where there was not excessive noise and disturbance. For this reason, 3 participants were interviewed at the researcher's home, while 4 participants were interviewed at the participants' homes. As all of the participants worked, 6 participants were interviewed in the evening after work, whilst 1 took place on the weekend.

In terms of **ethical considerations**, prior to each interview, the nature and purpose of the interview was explained to the participants. The participants were presented with an informed consent form which detailed that their participation was entirely voluntary (See Appendix 2). It was further explained that the interview was to be recorded. Although the participants were ensured that the information obtained from the interviews would be kept confidential, the use of pseudonyms was an option available to them. As all the participants were comfortable with the use of their names in this research study, their first names have been used. While the nature of the study appeared not to lend itself to psychological and emotional stress, it was explained that they may still withdraw at any point during the study (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Note-taking was limited to the first introductory interview, which consisted of somewhat closed-ended responses. However, taking notes in the second interview was avoided, so as not to impose or interfere with the natural conversation and rapport of the interview (Henning, van Rensberg & Smit, 2004). The recording of the second interview ensured a more detailed record and allowed the researcher to be part of the conversation, as opposed to being distracted by arduous and lengthy note-taking (Crossley, 2000). After each interview, the recorded interview was transcribed almost immediately.

The style of interviewing was influenced by the researcher's awareness of the complex and possibly contradictory ways in which people give an account of their values, beliefs, and experiences. Thus, the challenge throughout the interview process was to accept noticeably conflicting statements, particularly issues around the media's influence on the participants' identity, whilst also gently encouraging the participants to explore areas in their lives where the media was (potentially) influential, in spite of their resistance to doing this.

The technique of probing and prompting was used to clarify comments that appeared unclear, to re-focus their attention on the relevant research topic, and to prevent an excessively lengthy interview, whilst also encouraging the participants to continue to share their opinions (Neuman, 1997).

Although it was necessary to maintain a comfortable and casual relationship with the participants, it was also important to maintain a certain amount of critical distance. Critical distance encouraged the researcher to remain self-reflexive, that is, aware of her own personal and theoretical assumptions during the interview process (Denzin, 2001). Critical distance also ensured that the researcher did not become overly immersed in the interview process, which could prevent the researcher from directing the interview in an appropriate direction.

Method of Analysis

Background

The method of analysis adopted for this study, interpretive interactionism, is a qualitative approach developed by Norman Denzin in the late 1980s. Drawing on postmodern, poststructural, and critical studies, interpretive interactionism examines the relationship between personal troubles, such as identity formation, and public institutions like media consumption. Denzin (2001) explains: "Interpretive interactionism fits itself to the relation between the individual and society ... [It] seeks to show how individual troubles and problems become public issues" (p. 154). The aim of the interpretive interactionist is to interpret and give meaning to problematic lived experiences of ordinary people in order to make these experiences available to readers (Denzin, 2001).

Denzin (2001) argues that like other interpretive researchers, interpretive interactionists maintain that the meanings of these problematic lived experiences are best given by the persons who experience them. This is achieved by capturing and representing the personal stories of ordinary people and their everyday lives – capturing their voices, emotions, and actions. Thus, at the heart of interpretive interactionism lies an authentic, empathetic, and emotional understanding of another person's story. 'How' questions replaced 'why' questions, namely, how and in what ways did the participants represent their experience of the media to themselves and other people? (Denzin, 2001).

A fundamental feature of interpretive interactionism is the desire to politicise everyday research. Denzin (2001) explains that day-to-day life involves an ongoing process of interpreting and making judgements about our own actions and the actions of others. However, these interpretative judgements are often based on flawed understandings as they are shaped by a number of socio-historical, cultural and ideological influences. Thus, people's account of their day-to-day experiences is never neutral or value-free, but instead influenced by number of normative ideals, or taken-for-granted meanings that circulate in the world. The aim of interpretive interactionism is to expose normative ideals. Denzin (2001) writes: "It seeks to understand how power and ideology operate through and across systems of discourse, cultural commodities, and cultural texts" (p. 4).

Hence, for Denzin (2001), interpretive interactionists acknowledge that it is impossible to provide a precise representation of the world. Instead, all representations of the world are subject to ideological influences. Hence, value-free inquiry is rejected in favour of the concept of *reflexivity*. That is, the researcher is explicit about and critically aware of the significant role she/he plays in the research process (Denzin, 2001). It is crucial that the researcher remain cognisant or reflexive of subject positions which are influenced by gender, politics, and ideology. The researcher is therefore not unaware of her own ideological subject-positioning, being a white, female of middle-class background, and its potential influence on interactions in this study.

Interpretive interactionists endeavor to expose ideologies within any system of discourse, or as Denzin (2001) writes, "The interpretive process exposes the knowledge and control structures that lie behind these meaning experiences" (p. 47). In following a Foucauldian approach, the interpretive interactionist looks beyond the 'meanings' of cultural systems, examining the *effects* that these cultural systems have on the people to whom they are addressed. This is achieved by examining the contradictions and inconsistencies in people's accounts.

According to Denzin (2001), when examining slices of human experience, such as people's account of the media's influence on their identity, multiple layers, or meaning and nuances emerge that are often contradictory and conflicting. "The interpretivist attempts to capture the core of these meanings and contradictions" (Denzin, 2001, p. 46). By seeking out

contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences, the interpretive interactionist depicts the important role that power and ideology play in the relationship between identity formation and the media. Interpretive interactionism was a unique and an extremely incisive tool as it enabled the researcher to move beyond the participants' surface level accounts of the influence of the media on their identity, in a search for deeper meanings.

Approach

Although interpretive interactionism does not impose systematic processes to be rigorously followed, Denzin (2001) does propose general steps, or a guideline, which were applied.

Through consecutive reading of the interview material, key phrases and statements that pertained to the participants' experience of the media, and in relation to their identity, were critically examined, coded, and interpreted according to two primary themes that were manufactured by the researcher. The *first theme* looked at how the participants offered an account of the **media's appeal**? That is, how the participants accounted for the way in which their preferred media form(s) attracted their attention? The *second theme* addressed how the participants gave an account of the **media's influence** on their identity?

The **first step** of *construction* entailed arranging the participants' account of the media into some sort of order so that it reflected their lived experience. Essentially, construction "classifies, orders, and reassembles the phenomenon back into a coherent whole" (Denzin, 2001, p. 78). The aim was to identify common experiences and address the ways in which the essential features affected and related to each other in a holistic way (Denzin, 2001).

The **second step** of *contextualisation* involved locating the essential features into the participants' personal story and social, political, and historical environment. Contextualisation of the participants' experiences assisted in showing the cultural construction of agency and meaning. Denzin (2001) notes that "contextualisation brings the phenomenon alive in the worlds of the interacting individuals" (p. 79). This step entailed contrasting and comparing main themes from the participants' stories.

It is important to emphasise that the aim of this research study was not to make generalisations from the findings. The focus of this research study was on meanings and interpretation, as opposed to generalisability, validity, and reliability. Moreover, in qualitative research, credibility is ensured by providing authentic, truthful, and systematic accounts of the participants' experiences, their beliefs, values, and their understandings. By following Denzin's (2001) method of analysis, and acknowledging that data analysis was a subjective and personal process, the credibility of the research was upheld (Neuman, 1997).

CHAPTER THREE - ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Two key themes were identified by the researcher which reflected the fluidity or malleability of identity formation and the insidious way in which the media is inserted into our lives. It is important to reaffirm that the focus of the discussion is on *identity,* and what people attribute from the media as influencing their identity, as opposed to an analysis of the media. In this study, identity – what it is to be a person - refers to how we describe ourselves to others *and* how we are produced as subjects (Barker, 1999).

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, two themes were identified:

> **a) Media appeal** addressed how the participants gave an account of the way(s) in which the media appealed to them, or attracted their attention.
>
> **b) Media influence** looked at how the participants gave an account of the ways in which the media, as a leisure time activity, influenced their attitudes, beliefs, values, and interactions in the world.

The theme of the media's appeal and the media's influence were found to be fluid and intertwined. For this reason, within the analysis and discussion below, these two themes frequently overlapped.

Media Appeal

Most participants used two or more media forms in their leisure time. For instance, Craig said he enjoyed "*TV, DVDs, and music;*" Carly noted "*Definitely, TV and music;*" whilst James said he preferred "*DVDs and radio.*" Although the remaining participants stated that they used only one media form in their leisure time, they regularly cross-referenced to other media forms and media messages during the course of the interview. Kathryn, who favoured watching TV, commented on DVDs, Playstation, and the Internet: "*It's dangerous on the Internet. The people you get are dodgy.*" Chanelle, who enjoyed reading women's fashion and celebrity magazines, spoke about the movies: "*There was this one movie, The Break-Up; I actually thought that they wrote the movie on my life.*" Likewise, Edward claimed that he used the Internet in his leisure time, yet he also referred to programmes he watched on TV.

The participants' reference to various media forms and media messages was possibly reflective of the intertextual nature of the media. As McQuail (1994) asserts, the media constantly reflects similar messages or stories across various media forms. Silverstone (1999) argues that due to the ever-present nature of the media in our lives, our media usage is somewhat "nomadic." He (1999) writes: "We switch in and out, on and off, from one media space, one media connection to another like 'nomads' or 'wanderers' moving from media settings to another … from TV, to magazines, to radio to Internet, often being in more than one media space at a time" (p. 9).

Most of the participants said that they engaged with other activities whilst using their preferred media form in their leisure time. Craig noted that when watching TV, he was *"reading magazines, chatting with my housemates, cooking …."* Carly stated: *"When listening to the radio, I am usually cooking or cleaning."* James said that when watching DVDs, he was usually eating supper with his family or his girlfriend. Moreover, three participants asserted that they often used the media as a 'background' distraction. Carly said: *"Ja, when listening to the radio, I am usually cooking or cleaning, like background entertainment. Especially when I am alone."* As Ang (1996) contends, media usage is generally not an insulated and separate activity; it is often interconnected with other activities such as eating, talking, or doing chores around the house. Hence, media usage is not a separate thing that people do, but rather it is (deceptively) integrated into our day-to-day activities and experiences (Ang, 1996).

The point taken from the above analysis was that since the media formed an integral part of the participants' everyday activities, it seemed inevitable that their sense of self – their identity - would be shaped and influenced by the media. However, an analysis of the interview data revealed that there were times the participants were unaware, and most importantly, resistant to the idea that the media was shaping them and their view of the world.

The participants offered an ambivalent account of the media's appeal. Although they were aware that informative or educational media messages, such as the news, were important in keeping them informed about their world, when using the media in their leisure time, the participants preferred media forms and media messages that provided them with a distraction and escape from everyday concerns. As James noted: *"The real world is at work. Being at*

home watching DVDs is my escape … Good distraction from a rough day or if I'm feeling a bit down." Brenin said: *"I don't really like the news in general […]. It's important to a certain extent to know what's happening in the world, but everything you see happening in the world is negative."* Consequently, escapist type media messages appealed to the participants, as they were light-hearted and did not demand their full attention. This allowed the participants to relax, unwind, and 'switch-off.' James explained this in his comparative account of his preferred media message, namely British comedies, versus informative documentaries:

> James*: "The Animal Planet and Crime and Investigation are more informational … Informative … Tells you stuff about the animal. How it works. How it lives. British comedy makes me laugh."*
> **Researcher***: "So it's [British comedy] more relaxing than Animal Planet?"*
> James*: Ja. More relaxing than Animal Planet. I seem to switch off […] whereas with Animal Planet you find yourself more intense, concentrating more on what they are talking about."*

Kathryn attempted to justify her avoidance of news-based media:

> Kathryn: *"I don't like watching the news. It's too sad. The news is reality and it reminds me of the death and destruction, and what people are doing to each other, and what they are doing to the world […] It's not that I want to hide away, or be unaware of what happens in the world. I am perfectly aware. I would rather not focus so much on all the negative stuff. It's not healthy for people."*

At the end of the interview, Kathryn expressed her irritation with people who avoided informative type media messages, such as *National Geographic.*

> Kathryn: *"It makes you aware of stuff. The media should do more along those lines because that's the way the world is going and no one is paying attention. People get distracted by all these other things. They don't really concentrate on what's happening – like the environment."*

From Kathryn's initial comment it was evident that she, like the other participants, tended to avoid news-based media as it related to 'reality,' or rather, everyday issues. However, to prevent her from being perceived in a negative light, namely as a person who hid away from reality, Kathryn attempted to re-position herself more positively. This was seen in her immediate rebuttal that she was *"perfectly aware"* of world issues, but chose to avoid them. This comment also served to justify her engagement with escapist type media messages.

Furthermore, it was evident that Kathryn was unaware of the contradictions in her comments. Initially, Kathryn acknowledged that she pursued escapist type media messages in her leisure time, as she felt informative media messages were negative and depressing. However, towards the end of the interview, she said that people tended to be too distracted with meaningless *"other things,"* hence her suggestion that the media offer people more informative type programmes. Apparently, Kathryn was unaware that she was in fact one of 'those' persons that she was scornful of, as she too pursued escapist type media in her leisure time.

In an attempt to smooth over the contradictions in her account, Kathryn used the ideologically based categories of 'us' and 'them.' That is, in a quest for positive self-esteem, Kathryn assigned positive attributes to herself – the 'us' – namely, people who were mindful of socio-political concerns, and therefore entitled to pursue escapist type media messages, whilst she assigned negative attributes to others – the 'them' - people who were ignorant of world issues, and distracted by pointless concerns. This enabled her to re-affirm herself as an autonomous, self-conscious individual who was not duped by the media.

The participants acknowledged that one of the major ways in which escapist type media messages appealed to them and attracted their attention was through a number of exaggerated and sensationalised images. The overwhelming response from the participants was that the media used these sensationalised and glamorised images as a vehicle for the promotion and sale of consumer goods and high consumption lifestyles.

The participants offered a somewhat ambivalent account of these escapist type media images. Although these exaggerated media images and media messages were seen as entertaining and enjoyable, they also evoked a degree of frustration. For instance, when asked whether the media blurred the line between the 'real' and the 'non-real,' Edward said the following: "*Ja. But that's what's lekker. That's what I enjoy about it."* However, further on Edward said that *"They* [the media] *just show the greatness … they sell you the high, and they don't sell you the low, they sell you the product, they don't sell you the debt, and that's the problem."* Channelle offered the following comments on women's celebrity gossip magazines: *"I think it's quite informative and entertaining, cos half the time you know the stories are exaggerated … So you walk past the stand and buy it for a laugh. You don't take it seriously."* However, later on in

the discussion Chanelle added: *"I don't like it when they exaggerate ... I get annoyed because I feel whoever wrote it* [the gossip article] *tried to make it appealing to the readers."* Overall, Chanelle was insistent that her reading was merely *"entertainment"* reading. For Brenin, the Peroni advert was a good example of the media's attempt to seduce audiences:

> Brenin: *"All these supermodel ladies walking around, in glamorous lives with a helicopter and everything, and at the end it says Peroni. Like if you drink this drink, you are going to get this […] I call it tricknology. All they are trying to do is trick you […] buy a product and you can have this. So they glamorise everything […] there are a lot of people like me that know it's not real, but you get people who actually think [...] If you drink this ... that's what I'm going to get."*

Chanelle and Brenin maintained that they were able to distinguish media messages that were 'real' from those that were illusory. Implicit in their accounts was that as they were aware of the ways in which the media attempted to attract their attention, they were immune to its influence. Brenin's made use of his self-created word, *"tricknology,"* to emphasise his awareness that the media used various ways to trick or deceive people. His final comment that there were people like him who realised that these glamorous media images were used to entice people to buy Peroni, re-affirmed his position as a self-aware individual.

The participants frequently downplayed or 'made-light' of the times when they were taken-in by the media. For instance, Brenin humorously said that one of the*"biggest"* times he could recall being duped by the media was to do with a radio competition at the end of each year: *"You've got to send a sms. It cost 5 bucks (R5). Then they phone you and you got to say, I need a home for the holidays. It's like a mansion in Cape Town for two weeks or something […] I fall for it every time"* (laughter). Similarly, Edward adopted a rather amused attitude towards the media's ability to appeal to him.

> **Researcher: *"Do you sense that the images are unrealistic?"***
> Edward: *"Ja. Definitely. Especially with the motocross...they glam it up hey. Also with these women, these super models […] they make things, really expensive things, seem glamorous. To buy watches - like a Brietling watch - to buy that for R20 000, I mean it's crazy. But I want one. But I don't know why. I just see it and I see how the aeroplane on the little stand…it just looks so nice. And the one for R20 000, its got this little pin in it, and if you pull that pin out, no matter where you are on the planet it sends a signal, via satellite, a distress signal, back to head office and they actually come and rescue you. They send a search party out. Now, the furtherest I go is to Westbrook, which is 17 km from here (laughter). And I want this bloody watch. Just in case I am lost in the Gobi*

desert (laughter), or just in case I'm lost in the chocolate aisle in the Pick n Pay (laughter)."

Edward's amusement was coupled with a certain amount of confusion. This stemmed from the realisation that, even though he knew that the media used glamorised and exaggerated images in order to entice him to purchase products, he found he was still seduced by these images. Moreover, although Edward realised that, under his current circumstances, the Breitling watch was impractical and unaffordable, he still desired it. Kellner's (1984) reading of Marcuse perhaps assists in making sense of Edward's apparent confusion.

Kellner (1984) argues that the media and entertainment industries are powerful means of promoting and maintaining the capitalist ideology of consumption. They prescribe to people their goals, hopes, needs, and fantasies, and the way in which these can be attained. These prescribed values and behaviours are internalised and come to constitute our 'second nature,' resulting in people thinking, feeling, and desiring what the social powers and institutions call for. In short, capitalism, aided by the media, sets people up to consume. Thus, from Edward's comments regarding the Breitling watch, it appeared that he had internalised this capitalist consumer ideology.

Kellner (2003) adds that the 'megaspectacle' is a powerful way of capturing audience attention, and maintaining the capitalist consumer ideology. Through the megaspectacle, aesthetically pleasing, hi-tech, and glamorous images, which reflect high consumption, affluent, and active lifestyles, are positioned as desirable and attainable (Kellner, 2003). The Breitling watch, with its hi-tech internal tracking device, and attractively displayed on the aeroplane stand (together with its costly price tag), represents a life of action, travel, adventure, wealth, and success. In desiring - and ultimately buying - the R20 000 watch, Edward hoped to align his values and beliefs – his identity – with these desirable qualities. In this sense, the megaspectacle invited Edward to 'buy' into his identity.

The 'imaginary' – the fantasy and hoped for reality – is yet another powerful way of attracting audience attention, and interpellating people to behave in a certain way. As seen in Carly's comments below:

> **Researcher: "What is the appeal of hair products?"**
> Carly: *"I have a weakness for hair products […] something new that I haven't tried. Um, some promise of sleek hair that I know is unobtainable with peroxide (Laughter). But it's that constant dream."*

Media advertising offered Carly images of hope, the hope that one day she would find the shampoo that made her hair shiny and glossy. In this sense, Carly was captured by the possible outcome – the fantasy and the expectation – that in purchasing a certain product she would obtain the hair that she constantly longed for. Thus, the imaginary world portrayed by the media (in Carly's case, the image of glossy hair), became a hoped for lived reality.

However, if the idea of glossy hair was to be truly effective in meeting Carly's (perceived) needs, it cannot be an illusion that was imposed on her; but rather it must offer her a version of reality which resonates with her and that she can identify with. Thus, the particular image offered by the media - even if it's an imaginary form – must be (potentially) attainable and appear to meet people's needs and desires. Eagleton (1991) explains the appeal of ideologies to individuals as part-truths which become exaggerated to serve a particular function. These exaggerated part-truths, or ideologies, are fed back to people in ways that makes them believable and attractive. In short, ideologies work because there is an element of truth to them. For Carly, the idea that certain shampoos would leave her hair glossier than other shampoos was possible. Thus, her search for the perfect shampoo cannot be dismissed as simple madness.

In an attempt to rationalise what could be perceived as irrational behaviour, namely, the on-going quest for the *"unobtainable,"* Carly immediately said the following:

> **Researcher: "You like the glossy hair images?"**
> Carly: *"I really don't believe that Eva Longoria dyes her hair with products bought at Clicks. I really don't believe it. There has got to be something like they put in these scientific things, like this will stay guaranteed six weeks or whatever it is. I'm such a sucker for gimmicks. I've got so many different kinds of hair products, but my hair always looks the same, nothing ever changes. My hairs my hair (laughter). It's genetic."*

In an attempt to re-position herself as a rational individual, Carly stated that she was not duped by the media's use of celebrities. This served to distance her from what could be perceived as fickle and ignorant behaviour. However, in claiming that she was more likely to buy a product with 'scientific guarantees,' it was apparent that there were times that she too was unaware of the ways in which the media appealed to her. Carly appeared unaware that the word 'science' often conceals the ideological construction of information or knowledge. 'Scientific' information often misleads people into believing that the information they receive is based on facts and therefore 'truthful.' This negates the role that interested parties, such as media advertisers, play in the construction of such information in order to sell their products.

It was apparent that there were times during the discussion that Carly recognised that she was behaving in a way that was contrary to the way she perceived herself to be, or more accurately, she misrecognsised her behaviour. Although she imagined (and hoped) that one day she would find that 'perfect' shampoo, she also acknowledged that she was a *"sucker for gimmicks,"* and that it was unlikely that any shampoo would be able to give her the results she hoped for. In this sense, her actions challenged her view of herself as an individual that made rational and reasonable choices. That is to say, in spite of knowing that it was unlikely that she would obtain the results she wanted, she continued to purchase various hair products.

Again, by maintaining that her *"weakness for hair products" "makes for funny conversation,"* Carly tried to reassert her position as an agent that was in control of her actions. Carly went onto explain:

> Carly*: "It's something that now that I've got a bit of cash … But it doesn't influence me in particular, cos there were times I was living on a campsite and I'd wash my hair with a bar of soap. I was still just as happy then, inside myself. I didn't pine for my shampoo. You get your little pleasures as and when you can."*

Although Carly knew that her quest for shiny hair was *"unobtainable,"* she insisted that her constant purchase of hair products was merely about getting *"little pleasures as and when you can."* By referring back to Kellner's (1984) understanding of Marcuse's argument, it is possible to challenge Carly's notion of 'pleasure.' In capitalist society, the notion of 'pleasure' has become prescribed to us by the dominant capitalist institutions; pleasure is tied into consumerism and commodities. According to Marcuse (1964), "only in a non-repressive

society [...] free individuals choose and determine their own pleasures, and really exist as individuals, each shaping his own life; they would face each other with truly different needs and truly different modes of satisfaction – with their own refusals and their own selection" (Marcuse, 1964, cited in Kellner, 1984, p. 180). Thus, as Ang (1985) reaffirms, "pleasure is not automatic, rather pleasure is constructed and functions in a specific social and historical context" (Ang, cited in Tager, 1995, p. 57).

In spite of Carly's insistence that her purchase of hair products was not tied into how she felt about herself (her identity), Donnelly (2002) reminds us that how one presents oneself is linked to identity. Hawkes (1996) clarifies: "In contemporary society, whether through fashion, diet, make-up, cosmetic surgery, reflexology, aromatherapy, detailed and obsessive shaping of the body in gymnasia, potions for internal and external application to nourish, shape and defoliate, the body has become the most fertile ground for the cultivation of self" (Hawkes, cited in Donnelly, 2002. p. 23). The participants' tendency to speak about the acquisition of commodities as though their identity was not contained in material items, was noticeable in this study, and is discussed in further detail in the theme media influence.

There appeared to be a degree of ambivalence regarding the media's presence in the participants' lives. That is, as the media was an easy way to relax and unwind, it often pulled them away from activities that were more fulfilling. This evoked in them a certain amount of 'guilt.' Craig remarked: *"I've learnt a lot off things from TV but I've also wasted a lot of time watching it."* When asked to expand on this notion of 'guilt,' Craig repeatedly moved from the first person to the third person.

> **Researcher: *"Does it [the media] pull you away? What would you be doing instead?"***
> Craig*: "Yeah. I don't know. Take a walk outside somewhere. Like kids today, staying inside and playing than actually going outside and playing."*
> **Researcher: *"What's this 'guilt' you're talking about?"***
> Craig*: "Like they're wasting away almost. They should be doing something constructive like making art or music or ... not just sitting there doing nothing."*

Once again, Craig reverted to the third person when asked why watching TV was more appealing than going for a walk to relax: *"I guess it's easier. People think it's not really a*

mission. You can just sit on your couch and not get tired …." Craig's tendency to revert back to the third person may be a result of his reluctance to view himself, or portray himself as an inactive and idle person that spends too much time watching TV. Earlier on in the interview Craig described himself as a 'sporty,' active person as seen in his comments, *"I'm quite a big biker"* and *"I watch a lot of rugby and cricket."* By reverting to the third person, Craig distanced himself from the contradiction that emerged in his account. That is, although he was aware that watching TV *"sucks energy"* from him, and took him away from more artistic and social activities, he continued to *"waste"* time on it. Craig's use of the more generalised 'they' enabled him to shift the blame, responsibility, and guilt away from himself. Crossley (2000) writes: "Shifts between 'I' and 'we' is an attempt to avoid the scrutiny and stigma that the 'I' may experience when standing alone" (p. 9).

At one point during the interview Carly expressed a similar ambivalence towards her media usage. On the one hand, she enjoyed the media as it was *"such an easy way to relax"* and was also a source of comfort in an *"empty house."* On the other hand, Carly was aware that, given that the media was such an easy way to relax, it also had a *"negative impact"* on her life, as it took *"preference over other things."* Carly acknowledged that she had become less sociable and did not spend as much time with friends, as she was *"quite happy to sit in front of the TV."* She used her experience of having lived overseas in the United Kingdom (a time when she did not have a TV) to elucidate her feelings.

> Carly*: "… there was a time while I was in the UK where I didn't have a TV for about four months, and if I wanted to watch a program I had to go and watch it at someone's place. It was quite nice to have to go and see someone. It was quite nice 'cos it forced me to get back into my reading. I'd go to the library like every two weeks and get more and more books. It was really rewarding. Even when I moved in here I kept thinking, oh well, I'm not going to get lonely 'cos I've got so many little projects that I have to do. And every night, I've still got those projects to do, and I just sit in front of the TV. Like I've got an easel in there that I wanted to start doing drawings again. And I just keep putting it off … I'll do it in the weekend ..."*

Carly found that now that she had a TV, she was less inclined to engage in social and creative activities, such as visiting friends, reading books, and engaging in creative projects. In this sense she felt that her creative abilities, such as painting and *"little projects,"* had taken a

'backseat.' Her admission that these activities were *"really rewarding,"* suggested that these activities were more satisfying and fulfilling than watching TV.

Once again, Kellner (1984) assists in making sense of Craig's and Carly's feelings of ambivalence. Kellner (1984) writes that human beings find meaning and fulfillment when expressing their creative energies. However, in capitalist societies, where work is frequently oppressive and people are alienated from their creative and social needs, 'free-time', or leisure time, is an opportunity for them to express their need for pleasure, creativity, and enjoyment. However, in expressing their creative and social energies, people may start to question their present (exploitative) conditions.

Hence, in capitalist societies the media serves to control and manipulate people's 'free time,' limiting people's individual expression and critical consciousness, thus preventing them from challenging the oppressive status quo (Kellner, 1984). The media's tendency to pull people away from more rewarding activities is therefore not unintentional. But rather, the media is a powerful form of domination that serves to dull people senses and socialises them into accepting society's structures, ideology, and way of life.

In spite of Carly's recognition that her TV viewing distracted her from more meaningful activities, she was adamant that it was not something she was prepared to give up. Carly justified her standpoint with the following comments:

> Carly*: "Coming from a bit of a creative background I like looking at camera angles and different effects that people are using. So I do think about stuff a little bit more than just looking at the TV screen and switching off."*

Carly's justification that her TV viewing was not entirely 'mindless' as she utilised her creativity suggested that she, like Craig, was not comfortable with portraying herself as a person that was at the mercy of the media's seductive charms. However, the effects of both Carly's and Craig's actions, namely that they often watched TV in place of other more rewarding activities, revealed that they were not as in control of their media usage as they believed themselves to be. When probed further, Carly said that to alleviate her guilt she tended to coincide her TV viewing with more productive activities:

> Carly: *"I feel like I should be using my time more constructively. What I find I do a lot, is then I will do a project in front of the TV and then I will feel less guilty then. So, I will then mend a shirt that had a hole in, in front of the TV and then I'll feel far less guilty."*

Like Carly, Kathryn frequently combined her TV viewing with other 'practical' activities, or chores: *"I'm usually writing in my diary, making jewellery, writing a 'to-do-list' or reading books."* Hence, it appeared that Carly's and Kathryn's TV viewing evoked both feelings of pleasure and feelings of guilt, or what Ang (1996) calls a 'guilty pleasure.' According to Ang (1996), gender plays an important role in media habits, as different media habits are often reflective of the different positions of power that men and women hold within the home environment. Men, traditionally positioned as wage earners, considered television viewing as a means of relaxation after work, whereas women, generally seen as keeping the home, frequently combined television viewing with domestic responsibilities, such as cleaning or cooking.

Women's inclination to combine their TV viewing with 'productive' domestic responsibilities was a way in which they could offset their feelings of guilt (Ang, 1996). Brundson (cited in Ang, 1996) further adds that "women's distracted mode of watching television" (combining TV viewing with domestic chores), is not about an essential core, or feminine attribute, but rather a result of a number of "complex cultural and social arrangements which make it difficult for them to do otherwise" (p. 50).

In summation, all the participants stated that when engaging with the media in their leisure time, they preferred escapist type media messages to the more informative type media messages. Moreover, the overwhelming response from the participants was that they were aware that the media used exaggerated and sensationalised escapist type images to attract their attention, or more accurately, to appeal to them to buy products. Implicit in their awareness was that they were able to ward off its potential influence on their lives. Furthermore, the participants claimed that other people, as opposed to themselves, were taken-in by the media. By exposing the ambivalences and contradictions in their accounts, it was possible to show that when positioning themselves, there were times that the participants were unaware of the ways in which the media appealed to them, and more importantly, interpellated them to behave as subjects of an *individual* kind and as subjects of capitalism. The participants repeated attempts

to position themselves as agents in control of the media's influence is discussed in greater detail in the theme of influence.

Media Influence

The theme of media influence examined how the participants accounted for the ways in which the media influenced their view of themselves - their values, their beliefs, and their behaviours - and their social interactions in the world. This section is addressed in **two** sections. The *first* section looks at the participants' account of escapist type media messages versus informative type media messages. The *second* section addresses the participants' accounts of the 'megaspectacle.'

The influence of escapist type media messages versus informative type media messages
Overall, the participants stated that they preferred engaging with escapist type media messages in their leisure time. These media messages were seen as 'light-hearted' entertainment - a chance to relax and escape the burdens of the 'real' everyday world – and thus were not viewed as shaping their lives in any meaningful way. The participants tended to avoid informative media messages such as the news, or educational programmes, as they related to day-to-day concerns, and were therefore perceived as negative and depressing. Informative media messages were considered to be influential, as it provided them with the necessary and important 'facts' about their world. This finding was reflected in Carly's comparison of the reality TV series, *Survivor*, to the news.

> Carly: *"It's just like comparing one of those to the news. Nothing's real. You know that nothing's going to impact you negatively. It's not the exchange rate or the government, or anything that has to do with the real. For me that's escapism. You can sit there and be completely enthralled in something that's not going to affect your life in any kind of way […] you can switch it off at the end and it's got nothing to do with your life and you've been entertained for a little while. That to me is escapism."*

Contained within Carly's distinction between *"real"* versus more escapist, or 'non-real' media messages, was that she was able to decipher which media messages impacted in her life. This position was elucidated in the following comments:

> Carly*: "It's [the media] positive cos it lets me unwind for a bit. I can have a laugh; you get to keep up with what's going on. But I wouldn't say its* [the media] *taught me any positive moral values or anything like that, apart from what I've always thought, which is*

like, be honest in the first place. It reiterates that. Say I watched the news everyday (laughter), then that would probably have a lot more impact, but it's not something I choose to watch. Because I do listen to the radio in the car and all of that, there are things that filter into my brain from the news and keeping current, but I choose these [the Survivor series] *to just switch-off and to not take in too much stuff."*

Once again, Carly re-affirmed that escapist type media messages helped her to *"unwind,"* *"switch-off,"* and *"have a laugh,"* and thus had little impact on her life, whilst, she considered informative media messages, like the news, as influential as they kept her informed about her world. Although, initially Carly stated that she chose not to pursue news-like media messages, perhaps in an effort not to appear superficial and uninformed, she immediately qualified her response by claiming that she (of course) listened to the news in the car and kept herself up-to-date. She nevertheless added that she determined to what extent these informative type media messages impacted on her, as seen in her comment that she *"filters"* this information into her *"brain."* Her repeated attempt to position herself as an agent immune to the media's influence was reflected in her statement that the media had not taught her any *"positive morals,"* as her values and morals were already within her. This assumption (that she controlled the media's influence) was perhaps what led to her assertion that, overall, the media was a *"positive"* in her life.

Similarly, Chanelle stated that she enjoyed reading women's fashion magazines in her leisure time, as it was an easy form of relaxation and way of taking *"her mind off"* what she was doing. Chanelle answered in the following way when asked whether the articles that she read in the magazine were influential in her life:

> Chanelle: *"No, cos my reading is purely my time and my pleasure and just to relax […] I like something to be quick and then it's over with … a quick thing to take my mind off what I'm doing, what I've done during the day, just to relax, and that's it. I don't really do much with the story. Unless it's a story on self-help stories, or determining whether you're an introvert or an extrovert. Then you read that and sometimes you take something valuable from that because it's an expert that's written that."*

Like Carly, Chanelle maintained that she selected which articles were important and made an impact on her life and which articles were for *"pleasure"* and relaxation. Billington et al. (1998) shed light on Carly's and Chanelle's claim that they were above social processes like the media. According to Billington et al. (1998), "How people come to experience their sense

of self varies significantly with historical changes from one society to another" (p. 48). For instance, the Western ideology of 'self-contained' individualism, which is arguably linked to changes in ownership and property relations in the seventeenth century, and the emergence of a capitalist economy, has had a powerful effect in changing the way in which people view themselves and their world. A fundamental principle of 'self-contained' individualism is that the individual is rational, self-directed, and autonomous. The individual is to a large extent, separate from society ('self-contained'), and thus able to ward off external social processes like the media.

As previously shown in the theme of appeal, a powerful way of exposing the long-standing ideological discourse of individualism was to examine the contradictory ways in which the participants gave an account of the media's influence. For instance, in her remark that the news was a way of *"keeping current"* and *"being informed,"* Carly gave the impression that informative media provided her with 'factual' information. This assertion negated the social and ideological construction of the news. That is, the news does not always reflect reality, nor does it simply offer objective facts and information about the world. Rather, the news selects and shapes the content of its message in order to relay certain understandings or meanings of reality (Fiske & Hartley, 2003). Moreover, as Kellner (2003) argues, nowadays the news is a 'spectacle' – glamorised and exaggerated – so as to attract people's attention.

Carly's comments below once more revealed that she was unaware of the ideological content contained within informative type programmes.

> Carly*: "There's the show that I think that's on here called 'You Are What You Eat.' So, that then impacts you while you're cooking that you think ... If she says this kind of oil is bad. So, that obviously influences your everyday life in a way that you actually take an action from that [...] there are some short programs that get you talking or even action what they say ... you should eat this or not eat that. This is the right way to exercise."*

Evidently, Carly and Chanelle seemed unacquainted with the contention that information that is presented as 'factual' and objective is frequently socially and ideologically constructed. For example, Chanelle's remark that she viewed information from *"experts"* as influential brought to light that she was unaware that all information (or knowledge) is filtered through certain

political, economic, and social agendas. As Calhoun (1996) notes, all knowledge is produced within a specific historical and cultural milieu, and as such, is rarely objective and value-free.

Thus, Chanelle's reference to the categories of 'introversion' and 'extroversion' are not neutral and objective terms (as she inferred), but rather, they are socially constructed ways of describing human behaviour. Over time, these categories - under the banner of scientific knowledge – have permeated everyday discourse and are now viewed as 'natural' and 'normal' ways of being. That is, the categories of 'introversion' and 'extroversion' are seen as unequivocal truths, thus excluding the possibility that social and political factors may influence the construction of such knowledge (Hook, 2004).

Carly's assertion that programmes like *"You Are What You Eat"* were informative and therefore carried more authority, showed that she too was unacquainted with the argument that so-called informative programmes are shaped by pervasive ideological discourses. That is, informative programmes which advised Carly about whether certain oil was *"bad,"* or whether a particular type of exercise was *"right,"* did not necessarily provide her with 'factual' or neutral information.

Hook (2004) explains that health beliefs and perceptions are represented and reproduced through language; they are culturally determined, ideologically loaded, and never value-free. One of the primary sites whereby we are controlled and regulated is through the disciplining of the body. The discourse of surveillance, as seen in Carly's account of 'good or bad' values or 'right or wrong' behaviour, position the individual as responsible for monitoring, disciplining, and controlling their body. This view of the body – as a project that is under constant scrutiny - is reflected back to people through media advertising, self-help columns, and advice literature (Hook, 2004).

Hook (2004) further asserts that knowledge is often produced by those in a position of power (historically, this position of power has been held by Western, white, males). Berger (1972) adds that in Western society, traditionally women have been the object of scrutiny and regimentation. Media information which provides women with the *"right"* or *"bad"* exercise reflects and supports prevailing ideologies of the 'ideal body image,' prescribing to women

what actions they must take and what products they need to purchase to achieve this 'ideal image'(Berger, 1972).

The influence of the 'megaspectacle'

A powerful way of examining how the participants' gave an account of the media's influence on their identity, is the introduction of Kellner's (2003) notion of the megaspectacle. In the theme of media appeal it was established that all the participants maintained that they were aware that media appealed to them through a series of sensationalised images. Furthermore, unlike others, they were able to determine which media messages were 'real' versus which were 'non-real.' The overall inference was that in light of their awareness of the media's tactics of seduction, they were immune to its influence. As James noted in regard to TV adverts related to exercise equipment: *"Like the AB King, is going on people's gullibility"* and *"brainwashing people […] "...meanwhile I know the truth."* Similarly, for Edward the programme *Cheaters* was *"obviously"* sensationalised, and thus referred to it as *"dead watching* [and] *just for a laugh."* For Chanelle, gossip magazines were clearly exaggerated and sensationalised to increase the sale of magazines, thus her assertion, *"you have to make the call whether you believe them or not."*

Although Chanelle said that her reading of celebrity and gossip magazines was simply *"entertainment reading,"* her comments below show that she was not fully aware of the subtle ways in which the media appealed to her and shaped the process of identification.

> Chanelle*: "There are certain articles that you read and you think, good for her, I'm glad that she did that, or I'm glad she stood up for herself, but it doesn't really influence my life. You know, it's more just like reading short stories. You know, you take what you want to, like books."*

Although Chanelle's remark, *"you take what you want to"* indicated that she felt she was able to select which articles affected her and which did not, in stating that she supported the woman in the magazine article, as seen in her comment, *"I'm glad she stood up for herself,"* Chanelle identified with the woman's behaviour, and thus affirmed her own identity. As Krieger (1991) writes: "When we discuss others, we are always talking about ourselves. Our images of 'them' are images of 'us'" (Krieger, 1991, cited in Denzin, 2001, p. 319).

Carly spoke candidly about the programme *Survivor,* and its tendency to encourage underhanded behaviour: *"… it's definitely accepted to back stab. The whole point of the game is to get out on top."* Although she recognised that *Survivor* taught people about social interactions, ultimately she maintained that this type of programme did not impact on her life in any meaningful way.

> Carly*: "Like in Survivor, you got strong guys on the one team and weak guys on the other and yet the weak people keep winning and … What were they doing? It's just interesting to see the dynamic […] you do very much think, I wonder… I could never do that challenge […] So you relate in a way, where you think if that was me I couldn't do it, or what a sissy, I could have done that in two seconds, you know […] There's a lot of times where I think wow, I wish I could have the balls to say that, or stand up to that person … [S]o I think it teaches you that kind of thing … but … if there were other things that I was watching I would probably get a lot more from that."*

Due to the complexities involved in the construction of identity, it was impossible for Chanelle and Carly to be aware of all the factors at play when 'doing' identity. As Calhoun (1996) maintains, we cannot know our identity through internal reflection alone, as our identity is always tied into the social relations we have with others and our historical, political, and cultural context. Arendt (1958) adds: "The 'who' of each person, which appears clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (Arendt, 1958, cited in Calhoun, 1996, p. 2).

Although Carly believed that she was not affected by the media, there were clearly times that she was unaware that the media was shaping how she perceived herself and her world. Carly's use of competitive language, seen in her comments regarding *"strong guys"* and *"weak people,"* and the use of the derogatory terms *"sissy,"* (a weak person), reflects the competitive dimension that are prevalent in society and in 'games' like *Survivor.* In forming categories and contrasting and comparing people's behaviour against her (more courageous) behaviour, as seen in her comment *"...what a sissy, I could have done that in two seconds,"* Carly re-affirms her sense of self.

McLuhan (1967) informs us that 'games' are one of the ways people participate in society. 'Games' speak of the competitive values in society, the need for aggression and deception in order to win. Thus, *Survivor* appeals to and has meaning for Carly only by the fact that she

viewed it as an extension of her life. She was able to relate to it as the social rules in society were reflected in the social rules of the game. In stating that the *Survivor* program appealed to her as she enjoyed and related to the competitive elements contained within the programme, Carly was reflecting aspects of her self.

Furthermore, in claiming that she related to certain contenders and formed alliances with particular people, she too was making a statement about her identity. Turning to Fay (1996) we are reminded that identity formation is always relational: how we perceive ourselves – our actions and behaviours – can only be understood in relation to other people. Other people help define who we are, and who we are not. Fay (1996) writes: "You need others to recognize you as a person to insure yourself that you are a person" (p. 43).

Although unwilling to acknowledge that the media affected their lives in any significant way, the participants were overt in their assertion that others were influenced by the media. 'The youth' frequently emerged as the persons most at risk and easily influenced by the media. Carly had the following to say when asked whether *Survivor* influenced people's social interactions:

> Carly*: "I don't think it influences who they are later on in life. I think we all come to that point where we can sift out what's real and what's not. But I think when you're younger, you're so influenced easily by anything, by other people, by your peers, by media …"*
> **Researcher*: "So, you don't feel the TV or the shows in particular influence your values, goals, dreams, aspirations?"***
> Carly*: "No. Ah, I might have had a very different answer when I was younger […] I'm pretty solid in who I am and that I kinda know what I want without anything on TV or anything like that […]"*

Brenin had the following to say when asked who he thought was most influenced by the media:

> Brenin*: "Probably say younger people. Especially like when you are first hitting teenage life and everything like that …."*

Brenin and Carly inferred that at one time in their life, namely when they were younger, they were influenced by the media. However, now that they were older (and therefore wiser), they were above the media's influence. When accounting for the influence of the media, Carly and

Brenin, reverted to using the categories of 'us' and 'them.' Hall's (1996) notion of the 'other' assists in understanding their behaviour. According to Hall (1996), identity is constructed through difference, or more specifically in relation to what one is not. In other words, by positioning themselves as different and separate from the 'other,' namely those who were influenced by the media, Carly and Brenin affirmed their perceptions of themselves as individuals that were able to ward of the media's potential influence.

By applying a few of the concepts from Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory (SIT), it was possible to gain a deeper insight in regard to the emergence of the categories of 'us' and 'them.' Carly and Brenin categorised 'the youth' into a certain groups. The process of categorisation was not neutral, but contained certain ideological assumptions from which they drew inferences and conclusions. For instance, 'the youth' were assumed to be more susceptible to external influences. This possibly reflected the taken-for-granted 'storm-and-stress' position which constructs adolescence as a time of biological and psychological turmoil, and thus more vulnerable to external influences (Wilbraham, 2004).

Categorisation triggered the process of social comparison. This was evident in Carly's comment: *"I think there are some people that are heavily influenced, like no-one that I know cos I tend to have friends that are similar to me."* Carly assigned positive attributes to her own group, that is, friends who like her were not influenced by the media, whilst she assigned negative attributes to others, namely those people who were susceptible to the media's influence. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), group based comparisons are used to maintain a positive evaluation of one's own group and thus a positive identity.

It was apparent that although the participants tried to appear as though they were offering a critical discussion of the media, as the discussions progressed there were glimmers of immanent critique. In moving beyond the meanings of the participants 'talk,' and looking at the *effects* the media had on their lives, it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of complex exchange between identity and the influence of the media on the identity.

For instance, initially Craig stated that the media was becoming increasingly *"subliminal,"* that is, more seductive and insidious. This made it difficult for people to know when the media was

manipulating them. When asked whether he had been duped by media adverts in his bike magazines, Craig openly confessed that he had bought the *"whole kit."* He went on to admit that he felt *"irritated"* that the advertising in the bike magazines continually appealed to him to buy the latest, up-to-date biking apparel.

> **Researcher:** *"Do you ever feel, in terms of what the magazines sell, it's always one thing better than the other?"*
> Craig: *"All the time."*
> **Researcher***: "How do you feel about this?"*
> Craig*: "I do feel irritated (Laughter)"*
> **Researcher***: "You do it anyway?" (Laughter)*
> Craig*: "Yeah. Of course. It bugs the shit out of me actually."*

However, later on in the discussion, when asked whether he felt he was influenced by media advertising, Craig said the following:

> Craig*: "Myself. I don't think too much. But I think people can get trapped in the whole more, more, more, kind of thing and just go overboard and that's happened in America the most."*

Craig's comment that other people were trapped in wanting more seemed somewhat ironic considering his admission that had bought all the biking equipment for his bike. This sense of irony was fuelled by his statement that, the only thing that stood between him and the purchase of more biking apparel was lack of money. Craig held onto the erroneous notion that his interest in bikes was simply about the enjoyment of riding bikes. However, evidently, 'biking' also involves material acquisition, which in turn is tied into his sense of self. As Kellner (2003) argues, in today's society, the acquisition of material goods (or consumption), is not a neutral process, but rather, consumption and commodities are important way in which people acquire and express their identity. Morley (1992) adds "All consumption involves the consumption of meanings. All consumption actually involves the production of meanings by the consumer" (p. 210).

Initially Edward conceded (somewhat humorously), that the media influenced his behaviour, as seen in his comment early on in the interview:

> Edward: "*I honestly feel that people in the media, in marketing in particular, just target me (laughter) … if they want to sell something, they must just point it at me cos I'm one of those idiots that buys it.*"

However, as the interview continued, Edward's response indicated that he was increasingly skeptical towards media advertising and consumption: "*It* [media advertising] *sells you the product; they don't sell you the debt. And that's the problem.*" He added: "*I see the way the black labourers on site, how they maximize themselves just to get a cell phone. They want the latest cell phones just for communication.*" Further on, Edward referred back to his own experience: "*I spent big bucks on our honeymoon to Thailand. That's like 12 grand [R12 000] on the credit card and it's difficult to get out of cos you need that money to survive.*" In spite of his debt, Edward admitted that he still found himself walking around the shops looking to purchase "*weird things.*" His anxiety was most noticeable when he spoke about the need to keep-up with technological advances. He described this pressure in terms of an on-going cycle of consumption:

> Edward*: "Just to be a normal average person you need so many things. You need a decent car, you need a laptop for your communication, you need ADSL cos its fast connection, you need an HSDPA, you need a printer, or a scanner, a copier or a fax, you need a digital camera, a hand held camera, you need a cell phone, you need blue tooth. You just need so much stuff and it's all related to money, all that stuff you have to buy ... [T]hings like running on the beach take a back seat cos when you're running on the beach you're not in communication and you're just not making money. The money is the problem!*"

Edward maintained that in to order function in society – both in terms of work and leisure – people *needed* to purchase the latest hi-tech piece of equipment. However, for people to financially afford these things, they needed to work hard and earn money. This left less time for people to engage in leisure activities that did not generate money, such as "*running on the beach.*" If we applied some of the things that Edward was saying, it could validate McLuhan's (1964) argument that we live in an 'Age of Anxiety.' For McLuhan (1967), advances in electronic technology have resulted in increased levels of anxiety, as people feel compelled to commit to and participate in the electronic age.

However, like Craig, Edward denied that the media affected his values and goals: *"No it doesn't affect my values. I'll never have my values compromised. Your goals are obviously ... materialistic goals."* Like many of the participants, Edward did not want to appear fickle and easily influenced, and thus positioned himself as an individual whose values and beliefs were unaffected by the media. Edward went on to justify that *"materialistic goals"* were important in instilling a sense of drive and ambition in people:

> Edward*: It [the media] can be a very very positive thing. I've said a lot of negative things. It can maintain the drive in you, cos you feel very despondent when you don't feel like you are getting anywhere. But if you want that nice house, and the media are advertising it, and if you want the nice car, Ja it might be a materialistic society, but shit we got nothing else, so you might as well go for something. You might as well say, I want that new house and then you get it [...] your wife doesn't want a loser guy. She wants someone with drive."*

Although Edward appeared anxious and frustrated with the cycle of consumption, he immediately rationalised his actions by claiming that his personal goals were separate from his materialistic goals. His use of the word *"obviously"* indicated that he considered material acquisition as the natural way of the world and thus incontestable. In this sense, Edward did not offer a critique of materialism; he did not suggest that it was him in particular that was influenced by the material world. Instead, he maintained that the material world was a normal way of viewing the world - a matter of common sense. Edwards's attitude was perhaps reflective of Kellner's (1984) assertion that in capitalist societies the ideology of consumption is viewed as the only social reality; it has come to constitute our 'second nature,' thus making it difficult to challenge or change.

There appeared to be a degree of ambivalence in Edward's and Craig's description of material acquisition. For example, Edward referred to the 'need' to acquire new and improved media technology in order to *"keep up,"* yet he referred to 'wanting' a nice house or car. Similarly, Craig claimed that he bought biking equipment for his bike out of 'want' as opposed to 'need,' *"It's not like I have to have it. It's just that it would be nice to have."* Once more, as Kellner (1984) suggests that in capitalist societies the concepts of 'want' and 'need' are often confused. Kellner (1984) points to Marcuse's (1964) distinction between *true* and *false needs*: *"True needs* are vital to human survival and *false needs*, are imposed upon the individual from outside by manipulative interests" (Marcuse, 1964, cited in Kellner, 1984, p. 244). False needs,

such as the need for money, possessions, property, that is, materialistic goals, are repressive and perpetuate conformity, and bind the individual to the consuming society (Kellner, 1984).

According to Kellner (1992), media advertising is not merely about meeting people's needs, but it is also about meeting people's emotional and unconscious desires. These desires, which are socially and culturally constructed, play a part in the process of identity. Although Craig resisted the idea that the media influenced his identity, in stating that he purchased the Mongoose brand, as it was a *"cool"* and *"fun"* brand, he aligned himself – his identity - to these characteristics. Moreover, by admitting that certain 'lifestyles' appealed to him, like the *"surfer lifestyle,"* or the *"skater lifestyle,"* Craig was making a statement about who he was (or perhaps who he would like to be.) As Kellner (1992) argues, through visual image representations, advertisers create a link between consumption and sought-after traits, lifestyles, and products. In this way advertising entices people to be part of certain 'lifestyles;' they are invited to subscribe to certain subject positions. Thus, consumption becomes tied into one's sense of self or identity (Kellner, 1992).

A notable finding was that the participants tended to talk about materialism (the acquisition of material goods), as though their identity was not contained in material things. This contention was perhaps linked to the notion of 'choice,' that is, the participants perceived their interactions with the media as a result of 'choice.' Ang (1996) further writes that in view of the way that the media is inserted into people's lives, it seems that the media is not necessarily imposing itself on them, but rather people feel that they willingly and actively engage with the media, exercising their individuality and 'personal choice.'

For instance, Chanelle initially admitted that her style in clothing was influenced by fashion magazines, *"If I see a nice dress in the magazine, and I knew the shop was here, I would go out and buy it."* However, as the discussion progressed she began re-asserting her position as an individual that made personal choices about the clothes she bought*: "I won't go and buy green just because it's in fashion in Hollywood. I don't like it so I won't buy it. If I don't like it, I don't like it."* Evidently, Chanelle was unaware that all fashion is linked into identity. Fashion is not neutral; how one presents oneself is linked to identity.

As Donnelly (2002) asserts, identity is negotiated by fashions that are portrayed by the media. Whether a person copies these fashions they observe in the media, or discards them, they are still making use of what they see. Moreover, fashion and consumption concerns middle class values, as it primarily concerns those people who can afford to spend money on fashionable clothes. In this sense, access to fashion is defined by economic terms, which is tied into one's identity.

According to Ang (1996), one of the primary means by which people are drawn into the seductions of consumption is through the discourse of 'choice.' However, the notion of 'choice' is constrained within specific parameters. This was evident in Carly's statement: *"Just the way I'm informed is generally through the media. If I look around* [she pointed to her household possessions], *the only reason I got this stuff is cos I looked for a special bargain in the newspaper. In my life it's a positive."* Carly believed that the media was helpful as it advertised a variety of products that she could choose from, and advised her on products that could be purchased at good prices. In this sense Carly assumes that her acquisition of products was neutral. However, Carly's tendency to express and define 'choice' in material terms highlighted that her choices were within the prescribed parameters of the consumer life-style.

This was also evident in Edward's remark: "… *if you want that nice house, and the media are advertising it, and if you want the nice car, Ja it might be a materialistic society, but shit we got nothing else, so you might as well go for something."* The assumption that we consumed through 'choice' is illusory, or as Marcuse (1964) suitably writes," 'freedom' and 'choice' are illusory because the people have been preconditioned to make choices within a predetermined universe that circumscribes their range of choices to the choice between Ford or General Motors, Wheaties or Cheerios, Tweedledum or Tweedledumber" (Marcuse, 1964, cited in Kellner, 1984, p. 248). By ideologically concealing the social contradiction of consumerism, the notion of 'choice' is naturalised and thus considered the normal way of existence (Ang, 1996)

In summary, it was evident from the participants' accounts that they believed it was possible for them to 'pick and choose' which media messages affected their identity and which did not. Evidently, when positioning themselves in this way, they were unaware of the way in which they have been interpellated or 'called' to behave as subjects of a particular kind, more importantly, as subjects of capitalism.

On the one hand, capitalism appealed to the participants to consume, on the other hand, in capitalist society the participants have come to view themselves as rational, autonomous individuals who actively engage in the world and make rational choices. It was this apparent contradiction that made Fay's (1996) notion of ideology seem fitting: Ideology is what leads people to systematically misunderstand their own behaviours and actions. By examining the inherent contradictions in the participants' accounts and exposing the effects that the media had on their lives, it was possible to highlight the powerful role that ideology played in their identity formation.

CHAPTER FOUR - CONCLUSION

This research study was concerned with identity formation. The objective of this study was to investigate how 7 middle class South Africans gave an account of the various ways in which their leisure time media consumption practices shaped their identity. Thus, the central focus of this study was on identity formation, rather than an investigative study on the impact of the media. In this sense the media was used as window through which identity formation could be explored and understood. As one of the objectives of the research study was to get a general idea on what media appealed to the participants and why, a broad definition of the media was adopted.

From preliminary readings of the literature it is apparent that identity is shaped by a number of complex and contradictory social forces, thus attempting to understand how people give an account of the media's influence on their identity is likely to be a complex matter. This is particularly applicable in post-apartheid South Africa, which since the 1994 political transition, has undergone considerable changes in social relations and power balances (Wasserman, 2005) Franchi and Swart (2003, p, 149) write:

> "In South Africa, self-identity is constructed and reconstructed against the backdrop of structurally entrenched asymmetries (on the basis of 'race,' class and gender), created and maintained trough historical processes (such as apartheid, struggle politics, and the negotiated transition to liberal democracy)."

In light of the unique blend of transitional democracy power relations, socio-economic conditions and neo-liberal policies, it was expected that South Africans would have a particular take on the media. That is, as white middle class South Africans in post-apartheid South Africa, they would possibly have offered a more politicized account of the media. Perhaps this lack of topicality with regard to issues of race, gender and politics was that the participants, when using the media in their leisure time, opted to retreat from politics. In other words, what appealed to this small group of young South Africans, was that their leisure time media consumption practices allowed them to relax, unwind and escape the day-to-day 'realities,' such as political and government issues.

Another interesting response from the seven participants was that they tended to position themselves as agents in control and in charge of the media's influence. They believed that in terms of their values and their beliefs – their identity – they were immune to media influences (and thus above ideology). The participants frequently referred to others, especially young people, as being influenced. It was argued that the participants' stance reflects the ideological discourse of the 'self-contained' individual. The social construction of the autonomous, rational, and conscious individual that is in charge of his or her life has become the primary means by which people view the world, to the extent that it is experienced as natural and normal – as 'second nature.' (Calhoun, 1996)

The theoretical and research components of this study challenge the Western ideology of 'self-contained' individualism, wherein the individual as largely separate from society. It rejects the Western notion of identity as a unique, stable 'core' that resides deep within the individual. In contrast, this study offers a more contextualised and dialectical picture of the relationship between identity formation and the media, arguing that identities are shaped and produced by culture in specific times and places, and shaped (and possibly constituted) by particular historically situated and ideological discourses (Hayes, 1984, cited in Hook, 2004).

Drawing on a number of theoretical and conceptual ideas, it is possible to examine the role that ideology plays in the construction of identity. Critical social theory highlights the effects that certain historical, social, economic, and political arrangements have on individual identities and societies as a whole. Specifically, it addresses how ideology interpellates individuals that are subjects of capitalism. Media theories maintain that social processes like the media which contribute to identity, are never neutral. This study drew on Kellner's (2003) notion of the 'megaspectacle,' which reveals the way in which the media appeals to people, actively encouraging people to see and understand the world in particular ways and in certain terms. Finally, identity theories demonstrates that identity is relational, negotiable, and processural.

By highlighting the contradictions and ambivalences in the participants' accounts and examining the effect(s) that the media had on the participants' lives, it was possible to expose the deeply ingrained ideology of individualism and the powerful role that ideology played in the formation of their identity. Additionally, the analysis of the participants' accounts produced

a more active, dynamic, and contradictory picture of identity. Identity is not something we *have* which causes us to act in certain ways, rather it is something we *do*, as opposed to something that we *are* (Tuffin, 2005). In this sense it is argued that the participants live out the media's influence in their day to day practices.

While the intention of this study was not to provide generalisable conclusions, or definitive truths, it still offers a number of observations and interpretations that give insights into peoples' understanding of themselves and their world. It shows that identity formation is an ongoing process wherein we are ideologically interpellated to behave in particular ways. While it is impossible to remove ourselves from ideology, by becoming aware of it, by understanding how we become subjects of and for ideologies, we can limit it effects to a certain degree (Hook, 2004).

In this sense, 'critical' research encourages us to "look more deeply at how the categories of our consciousness are shaped, and how they in turn constitute both the world we see, and what we take to be possible" (Calhoun, 1996, p. 14). This enables us to challenge our preconceived notions … "to escape the limits of our own ideas," especially about 'who we are' and 'how we come to be the way that we are' (Collins, 2004, p. 2)

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

Preferred media forms and media habits
- In terms of your leisure time, is there a particular medium that you have preference for or use on a regular basis? (e.g. Internet, radio, print, TV, cell phone)
- Are there certain times of the day when you access your preferred medium?
- On average, how much time do you spend engaged with this medium?
- Are you usually involved with other activities whilst engaging with your preferred medium? Are you eating, reading, and cooking?
- Are you alone or with friends?

Appeal of the media: stories, plots, and key events
- What is it that you like or enjoy about your preferred medium? Do you find relaxing, entertaining etc?
- What do you like or dislike about you preferred medium?
- In what ways have media messages changed from when you were younger?

Media Influence
- Do you feel you preferred medium teaches you anything positive about your life?
- Do you think there are connections between the media (perhaps your preferred medium) and experiences or situations in your everyday life? If so, how do think it relates or applies to your life? Can you possibly give me an example of when it has applied to your life?
- Do you compare your own life to what you observe in the media?
- Do you think the media messages affect how you behave in your life?
- Do you find that the media influences your interactions with others?
- Do you think your favourite medium (or media in general) impacts on you as a person?
- In what way does it influence your view of the world, your values, actions, and beliefs? (If not, who or what influences your values and beliefs?)
- Have you ever been 'taken-in' by the media? Have you purchased anything that your saw in the media?
- Do you find you follow media messages more at certain times in your life?

Overall influence
- We have discussed your favourite medium, what other aspects of the media interest or appeal to you?
- What is their appeal?
- How do you think media overall impacts on who you are, how you see yourself and how you interact in the world?
- What do feel does influence your identity, or influence the way you see yourself and your world?

Conclusion

- Thank you for time and your input
- Explain what I will do with the information
- Re-affirm confidentiality
- Ask whether they have any?

APPENDIX 2

Informed consent form

Mr/Mrs/Ms…………………………………………………

I Ms Claire Protheroe am a student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am presently studying towards my Masters in Psychology. I have a special interest in the relationship between media and its influence on identity. You are asked to participate in this research project.

- The first interview will take approximately 15 minutes.
- The second interview will take place the following week and will take approximately 45 minutes.
- The interview will be recorded.
- The interview data will be secured and stored for a period of 5 years.
- You may stop/withdraw from the interview or study at any stage.
- Your decision not to participate will not result in any form of disadvantage.
- The interview process will not incur any financial expenses.
- All information volunteered will be confidential and anonymous and will be used for this research project.
- Please feel free to contact myself Claire Protheroe on 082 -873-7904 or my supervisor Grahame Hayes on (031) 260-2530 for further information.

I…………………………….…………….. (Full names of participant) hereby consent to being interviewed for the research study which looks at the role media play in everyday interactions. I have had the procedure explained to me and I understand the nature of the research project. I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

_____

Signature

_____

Witness

_____

Date