**Coolhunting: Evaluating the Capacity for Agency and
Resistance in the Consumption of Mass Produced
Culturally-Relevant Goods**

by

Jasmin Maria Teresa Mosielski

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

in

Communication

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario**

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Direction du
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395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-91603-2

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-91603-2

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Abstract

Coolhunting, a consumer research phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s, has become widely used by large capitalist producers of culturally relevant goods to gather information about emerging consumer trends. However, the methodological, ethical and conceptual characteristics of the practice of coolhunting raise concerns regarding the capacity for consumer agency and the viability of oppositional meanings in the context of the consumption of mass produced and culturally-relevant goods. This thesis assesses coolhunting against accepted standards for ethnographic study and offers a critical analysis of the potential threat the practice poses to the notion of agency and resistance within the consumption of popular culture (as outlined in Stuart Hall's circuit of culture model). Based upon this analysis, this thesis offers a final evaluation of the ongoing relevance of the circuit of culture model as well as the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture and instrumental rationality.

Acknowledgements

My biggest thank you is to Dan, my husband, intellectual counterpart and best friend. My thesis would have never come together without your support, creative and intellectual input, and the countless hours you spent editing and proof-reading draft after draft. I am proud to admit that I am very lucky to have a hubby who is smarter than me. Thank you for everything you did to help keep me calm, motivated and focused so I could achieve this goal.

A tremendous thank you to Professor Dwayne Winseck for taking in an 'orphaned' part-time student mid-thesis. Thank you for challenging me and guiding me through my thesis journey and for your enduring patience, understanding and humour.

Thank you to Emily for being a kindred spirit throughout my thesis writing – I remember what you said to inspire me to embark on this project and I felt like from that time on you were with me all the way.

Jessica, I have long looked to your chutzpah, wit and vivacity as a model of strength and grace-under-pressure. But I am especially grateful to you for being my coach and confidant during this time of 'darkness and thesis.'

And finally, a heartfelt thank you to my colleagues and friends at Health Canada, especially Christine, Peter, Dr. Weinman (Dr. Bob), Linda, Daniela and Edith for the many ways in which each of you have been there to help and support me over the years we've been working together.

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of our cat Tigger, the best furry friend ever.

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Introduction

Coolhunting, a consumer research phenomenon that emerged in the 1990s, has become widely used by large capitalist producers of culturally relevant goods. Large multinational corporations that produce culturally relevant goods (such as Converse, The Gap, Reebok, MTV, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Coca-Cola) employ coolhunters to gather information about emerging consumer trends. The types of trends coolhunters chase possess particular qualities and characteristics. In his formative article, "The Coolhunt," Malcolm Gladwell explains that the basic premise of coolhunting is that 'cool' trends emerge from youth subcultures, and because 'cool' is a primary driver for mass culture consumption, these cool trends are bound to diffuse across the larger consumer population (Gladwell, *Coolhunt*). Corporations are thus interested in the early detection and interception of these subcultural styles and trends to inform the production of culturally-relevant goods. Corporations hire coolhunters to discover emerging trends so that they, in turn, can co-opt and reproduce these new styles (and to an extent, their associated meanings) and profit from these trends' already-growing popularity. From a critical theory perspective, this phenomenon of coolhunting is particularly disconcerting as the meanings created and encoded in particular styles by subcultures are often oppositional, representing these groups' struggle against capitalist hegemony. As coolhunters discover emerging styles, and aid large multinational corporations in translating these styles into cultural products within the logic of capital, these oppositional meanings may be lost.

Hypothesis

Major coolhunting agencies such as Lambesis, Look-Look, The Zandl Group, and Sputnik, describe their work as the ethnographic study of youth, and youth subcultures. Like the ethnographers whose work assisted colonial powers in exploiting and controlling various aboriginal populations a century ago, coolhunters perform the role of agent provocateurs for multinational corporations who wish to co-opt and capitalize on emerging youth subcultures. Because of their role in facilitating the co-optation of the styles generated by youth subcultures, and their associated meanings, the act of coolhunting represents a contemporary example of what the Frankfurt School described as the logic of instrumental rationality. Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that mass production in the advanced stage of capitalism is underpinned by the logic of instrumental rationality, a logic that treats nature, people and cultural meanings as resources to be managed, calculated, categorized and exploited for profit (Held 66-67). Extensive capitalist bureaucracies manage not only the means and methods of production, but also consumers' desires. Under instrumental rationality consumers themselves become a resource to be researched, tracked and categorized, with the aim of exerting influence and control over them. According to the Frankfurt School, the all-encompassing character of instrumental rationality represents a form of total domination, where not only natural and human resources, but all ideas, meanings and emotions are assimilated into production for profit and to reinforce capitalist domination.

The pattern of production/consumption/co-optation facilitated by coolhunters can, however, also be read in a different way, one that is illustrative of Stuart Hall's circuit of

culture model. In contrast to the pessimistic view of popular culture held by the Frankfurt School, Hall's model suggests that individuals can exercise agency through their consumption of mass produced culture. According to James Procter, Hall's circuit of culture model provides an optimistic reading of the capacity for small gestures within mass culture consumption, while remaining aware of the Frankfurt School's warnings about the one-dimensionalizing effects of capitalism and its logic of instrumental rationality (Procter 72). The notion of consumer agency in Hall's work stems from his encoding/decoding model, which argues that meanings are not simply absorbed by recipients, but rather that individuals actively interpret (decode) received messages and redefine their meanings in accordance with their own particular identities and experiences. The meanings decoded by individuals in the process of their consumption of culturally relevant goods are what Hall calls "'creative and historical agency' – the power of the people to express and determine their own feelings and actions" (Procter 38). In the circuit of culture model, agency can occur not only at the stage of individual decoding (i.e. when consumers unpackage messages and assign new meanings to the products they consume), but also when meanings created by individuals are recognized by corporations, who then respond by incorporating these meanings into the design and production of culturally-relevant goods.

Unlike other more transparent consumer research techniques (such as focus groups or surveys, where subjects knowingly and voluntarily participate), the underlying corrosive characteristics of coolhunting raise concerns about its potential impact on oppositional meanings and alternative ways of life in the context of consumer capitalism. The

methodologies utilized by coolhunters to uncover emerging trends lack formal rigour and fail to adhere to generally accepted standards for ethnographic research. In this respect, this thesis will demonstrate how the practice of coolhunting threatens the potential for consumer agency and resistance within the circuit of culture model. By demonstrating the limiting affects of coolhunting on the circuit of culture, this analysis will also reaffirm the ongoing relevance of the mass culture critique presented by the Frankfurt School.

Significance of Coolhunting to Communications and Other Critical Theory Studies

The significance of coolhunting to the study of communications, and critical theory in general, is multifaceted. Foremost, coolhunting's ability to limit agency presents a challenge to all theories which argue that agency and resistance against capitalist hegemony are possible through acts of consumption of popular culture. The notion of agency as defined specifically in Stuart Hall's circuit of culture model and, more generally, in his cultural studies approach, establishes agency as the capacity to unpackage, interpret as well as create and express meanings, in an effort to determine one's own history through gestures of thought and self expression. In the context of popular culture consumption, agency and resistance can thus be seen in two distinct moments: first, when consumers encode/decode messages and assign new meanings to the products they consume; and second, when producers respond to consumers' meanings by incorporating them in the design of goods. Indeed, coolhunting raises questions regarding the ongoing relevance of the circuit of culture model in such an environment. Furthermore, coolhunting illustrates how agents of large capitalist corporations can

reduce the spread and impact of oppositional meanings through practices where profit outweighs questions of methodological validity and ethical principles. Coolhunting also revives the relevance of the mass culture critique raised by the Frankfurt School by bringing into question the ability of consumers to exercise agency within the context of popular culture.

Literature Review

Although formal documentation of coolhunting began to appear in the late 1990s, existing literature exploring the topic remains limited to a small number of academic studies, journalistic pieces and critical punditry. Malcolm Gladwell is frequently credited with coining the term 'coolhunt'. In his 1997 article, "The Coolhunt," Gladwell documents his experience of following a coolhunter on a 'hunt.' Although he does not offer a precise definition, Gladwell explains that coolhunting offers a "window on the world of the street," an insight into the 'cool' cultural trends, styles and sentiment which is developed by individuals, or small groups, who are not part of the mainstream corporate cultural industry (Gladwell, "Coolhunt"). Coolhunters, in other words search for those 'cool' individuals who are doing something new and cool to distinguish themselves from the mainstream, and in so doing, are also setting a new trend.

Naomi Klein offered the first published critique of coolhunting in *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Klein critically examines the economic and socio-cultural impacts of corporate branding and globalization, pointing to coolhunting as a tool for the corporate exploitation of youth subcultures as well as lower economic classes. As both

Gladwell and Klein indicate, the early to mid 1990s saw the formation of several major coolhunting agencies (Klein 70-76; Southgate 167; Gladwell, *Coolhunt*). Also during this time, many large corporations, such as fashion producers and those in the music industry, began to employ coolhunting as a technique for gathering intelligence about young consumers and emerging trends. While Gladwell's piece focuses more on documenting the coolhunting process, Klein provides insight into the socio-economic context that factored into the emergence of coolhunting and offers a more critical assessment of the practice.

In addition to Klein's critical reading, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter offer an alternative analysis of the impact of coolhunting on countercultures. In their book *The Rebel Sell: Why Culture Can't be Jammed*, Heath and Potter focus on coolhunting in an effort to dispel the theory of counterculture co-optation¹. Heath and Potter argue that coolhunters do not represent a significant threat to countercultural groups, because countercultures themselves are not inherently oppositional to the capitalist system and thus cannot be truly 'co-opted' or exploited by it. Heath and Potter draw heavily on Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool; Business Culture, Counterculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, which traces the evolution of corporate co-optation theory as a myth that emerged in the 1960s. Heath and Potter's analysis is reminiscent of the Frankfurt

¹The theory of co-optation argues that the "repression" imposed by the system is subtle and that "At first, the system tries merely to *assimilate* resistance by appropriating its symbols, evacuating their 'revolutionary' content and then selling them back to the masses as commodities. It thereby seeks to neutralize the counterculture by piling on substitute gratifications [. . .] that people ignore the revolutionary kernel of these new ideas" (Heath and Potter).

School's argument that popular culture is inherently commercial, and cannot be considered as a viable vehicle for resistance to capitalist hegemony.

In addition to written work, in 2001, the US-based Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) documentary program *Frontline* presented a detailed report on coolhunting entitled, "The Merchants of Cool: A Report on the Creators and Marketers of Popular Culture for Teenagers." This report analyses the power and influence of media and marketing companies, particularly in terms of their relationships with, and influence on, youth and youth culture ("Merchants"). Since its initial airing, the documentary as well as supplementary information, such as full transcripts of interviews with academics (i.e. Mark Crispin Miller, a Professor of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University and Robert McChesney, Professor at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois), journalists (Gladwell), pundits (Douglas Rushkoff, a media, advertising and culture critic), as well as several representatives of media corporations and key coolhunters themselves (Sharon Lee and Didi Gordon) have been made available on the Frontline "Merchants of Cool" website. This thesis draws heavily on these resources.

Further to these investigative works, two novels, which feature coolhunters as the main protagonists, and explore the relationships between coolhunters, innovators and consumer society, were also published in the early 2000s: *Pattern Recognition* by William Gibson (2003) and *So Yesterday*, by Scott Westerfeld (2004). Gibson's novel offers little insight into the processes or impacts of coolhunting; rather, it is a thriller that simplistically

presents coolhunters as having a kind of supernatural power to recognize cool when they see it. Gibson's heroine is described as having a 'sensitivity,' an 'allergic reaction,' to brands and is thus mysteriously able to determine if they are cool enough to be successful. Scott Westerfeld's novel, *So Yesterday*, also follows a coolhunter who, by becoming friends with an innovator, realizes the potential negative impacts that coolhunting has on creativity and ideas. Written for young, teenaged readers, the novel offers a simplified commentary about the manipulative nature of marketing and the production of fashion. As such, although these two novels discuss coolhunting, they offer little academic insight for the purposes of this thesis.

To fully understand the emergence of coolhunting, this thesis investigates the mainstream adoption of coolhunting. Both Gladwell and Klein point to a critical social shift, particularly in the fashion world, from top-down to bottom-up drivers for clothing trends. Contemporary French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky describes this shift as the 'democratization' of fashion, where the means of mass production upset previous notions of social and class status. In his book, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Lipovetsky examines how mass consumer society contributed to the rise of more 'democratic' leadership of, and broader access to, fashion. Lipovetsky's observations regarding the democratization of fashion, and the fashion industry's focus on youth street styles, present the basis for a definition of the concept of cool. Although most authors avoid presenting a strict definition, cool generally refers to a new measure of social status. Cool transcends class and encompasses notions of youthfulness and rebellion, including youth subcultures and their resistance to established structures and

hierarchies (e.g. capitalism or a hierarchical administration of fashion or other institutions). Naturally, because it acts as a marker of social status, cool is an important concept to producers of culturally relevant goods of all types (i.e. not exclusively fashion, but products ranging from music to alcoholic beverages).

I also examine the work of Dick Hebdige, John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts in order to understand the active and oppositional consumptive and meaning-making practices of various youth subcultures. The thesis takes these small sites of agency and meaning making seriously as sites of resistance to capitalist hegemony. This discussion further defines cool and clarifies the link between cool, as created by youth subcultures, and what Hall describes as negotiated or oppositional decoding positions and meanings.

Method

Coolhunting presents an excellent case study for testing the ongoing validity of both the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture as well as Hall's circuit of culture model. In other words, coolhunting serves as a potential exemplar of the logic of instrumental rationality, challenging the workings of the circuit of culture model. Coolhunters claim that their work involves ethnographic study of youth subcultures; thus, my critique begins by assessing the practice of coolhunting against accepted methodological and ethical standards for ethnographic study. The analysis applies these accepted principles as defined and described in the work of Mike Crang and Ian Cook (*Doing Ethnographies*),

Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (*Ethnography: Principles in Practice*), Martin Bulmer (“The Ethics of Social Research”), and Nigel Fielding (“Ethnography”).

To focus the present analysis on the concept of coolhunting as defined by Gladwell, only the five major coolhunting organizations identified in Gladwell’s work, or in connected literature, have been considered (i.e. Look Look, Lambesis, Intelligence Group, Zandl Group, Sputnik). In recent years, the term coolhunting has increasingly been misappropriated by individuals and groups who undertake trend watching or trend analysis using different parameters and methods other than those defined by Gladwell. For example, in *Coolhunting: Chasing Down the Next Big Thing*, Peter Gloor and Scott Cooper apply the term ‘coolhunting’ to the task of identifying any new trend. Gloor and Copper use the term coolhunting as a buzzword to refer to any type of diffusion studies, or other observations of trends, without actually determining whether these emerging ideas are in fact cool or not. For example, they mislabel various trend analyses, ranging from observations regarding the diffusion of innovations across scientific research communities to the surveillance of the general population’s increased use of social media, as ‘coolhunting’. This is not surprising because, despite the prevalence of the term in non-academic texts, little formal information is available on the subject of coolhunting, and detailed resources about specific coolhunting agencies are limited almost entirely to the above-identified companies’ own websites. Some limited financial data about these agencies is also available on *Google Finance*, and through *Hoovers*, a database containing business information on various companies.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Context

The thesis begins with an analysis of the Frankfurt School's mass culture critique and their concept of instrumental rationality. Drawing primarily on the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Marcuse's critical analysis, this chapter sets out the theoretical framework of this thesis. The Frankfurt School's critique of late capitalism is the foundation of the critical theory tradition and one of its key elements – the critique of the cultural industries – focuses primarily on the production (and controlled consumption) of entertainment products, such as radio and television programming and Hollywood movies. These corporations are seen as creating mass produced cultural goods that convey meaning. While this was useful at the time that the Frankfurt School wrote, today authors such as Lash and Urry argue that the emergence of an economy of signs means that nearly all consumer goods (e.g. clothing, personal music players, cellular phones, and so on) are layered with meaning, aesthetic values and so forth and, thus, should be analysed as cultural products/goods. As such, the discussion situates the Frankfurt School's mass culture critique in the context of present-day advanced capitalism where culturally-relevant products are no longer limited to media and entertainment.

Chapter 2 – The Circuit of Culture Model

The second chapter of this thesis explores the circuit of culture model as a response to the limitations and gaps of the Frankfurt School's mass culture critique. It begins by exploring the model's roots in Hall's encoding/decoding theory of communication, as well as its connection with the cultural studies field. The chapter highlights how the

circuit of culture model illustrates the capacity for agency within mass consumption. Where the Frankfurt School focused on the power and actions of cultural producers, the circuit of culture model stresses the potential for human agency and resistance in the consumption of popular culture. The chapter concludes by identifying the need for further application of the circuit of culture model to assess whether its arguments about the resilience of human agency in popular culture remain valid, particularly in light of the phenomenon of coolhunting.

Chapter 3 – The Story of Coolhunting

After reviewing the Frankfurt School and its legacy, as well as Stuart Halls ‘circuit of culture’ approach, chapter three examines the practice of coolhunting. This chapter explores the socio-historical context behind the emergence of coolhunting and surveys the rise of cool as a new symbol of social status. The discussion then presents a detailed definition of coolhunting and introduces key figures involved in its evolution, including the major agencies that offer coolhunting services, as well as the types of client corporations who hire them. Finally, the chapter explores the theoretical bases of coolhunting, focusing on the processes and methodologies that coolhunters use in their ‘ethnographic’ research. This chapter situates coolhunting within the circuit of culture model, exploring its role as a feedback mechanism and highlighting the challenges it poses to agency. In closing, the chapter suggests that coolhunting has an impact on the flow of meanings from consumers to producers and can potentially limit the potential level of agency and resistance within the circuit of culture.

Chapter 4 – Critical Assessment of Coolhunting

This chapter presents a critical assessment of coolhunting, its impact on the circuit of culture model, and the capacity for agency within the consumption of mass produced goods. The analysis presents an assessment of the ongoing validity of the Frankfurt School's mass culture critique and Hall's circuit of culture in the context of an "economy of signs" (Lash & Urry 3-4). Since coolhunters claim to mimic academic ethnographic study, the practice of coolhunting will be assessed against established ethical and methodological standards for this type of research. This test determines how well coolhunting functions as a feedback mechanism, in terms of how accurately, and ethically, it can transmit the meanings encoded by consumers to corporations. The analysis shows that, due to a range of methodological and ethical violations, coolhunting cannot be considered a viable form of ethnographic research, whatever its adherents' proclamations might be. Next, the chapter surveys the broader theoretical critiques of and commentaries on coolhunting. My basic argument is that the violation of established ethical and methodological norms of ethnography in the coolhunting approach reflects its deeper immersion in the logic of instrumental rationality and the pursuit of efficiency and profit versus cultural understanding. These transgressions inhibit not only the transmission of meanings within the circuit of culture, but also endanger the integrity of the coolhunted subcultures themselves and threaten the viability of oppositional thought and meanings within popular culture consumption.

Conclusion

The final chapter offers a review of the significance of 'cool' in present day late capitalism, where all mass produced goods hold sign-values and strive to be culturally relevant. In such a context, the co-optation of meanings by corporations is an unavoidable reality. In this context, the role of coolhunters is likely to expand to the surveillance of an ever-broader range of consumers and meanings. As such, the warnings presented to us by the Frankfurt School regarding the logic of instrumental rationality remain relevant, perhaps more than ever, as corporations pay increasing attention to the cultural meanings consumers assign to goods. In this reality, the circuit of culture model remains a useful tool for understanding the flow of signs/meanings within the processes of production and consumption, and for recognizing the ongoing capacity for agency and resistance within the consumption of popular culture. However, due to the impact that coolhunting and other such practices have on meanings as they move through the circuit of culture, and more broadly its detrimental effect on the subcultures that produce them, we need further analysis of such activities. The story of coolhunting reminds us as critical theorists, scholars of communications and cultural studies, and as consumers, to remain vigilant and critical of the behaviours and techniques employed in the capitalist mass production of culturally-relevant goods.

1 –Theoretical Context

According to David Held, in his book, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that mass production in late capitalism is underpinned by the logic of instrumental rationality, a logic that treats nature, people and cultural meanings as resources to be managed, calculated, categorized and exploited for profit (Held 66-67). Extensive capitalist bureaucracies manage not only the means and methods of production, but also consumers' desires. Under instrumental rationality consumers themselves become a resource to be researched, tracked and categorized by corporations, with the aim of exerting influence and control over them. According to the Frankfurt School, the all-encompassing character of instrumental rationality represents a form of total domination, where not only natural and human resources but all ideas, meanings and emotions are assimilated into production for profit and reinforce capitalist domination. In their mass culture critique, the Frankfurt School scholars (Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer) observed that instrumental rationality drives the scientific management of cultural goods and consumers. Instrumental rationality leads to standardized cultural products which are limited in meaning and lack the authenticity necessary to incite any deeper reaction. Such cultural products serve only as motivators for further consumption and as distractions from counter-hegemonic narratives. The potential for agency, resistance and freedom are reduced within mass consumer society as natural resources as well as human beings and their ideas, meanings and emotions are assimilated, commodified and exploited. It is not the mass production of popular culture which the Frankfurt School deplore, but how the instrumental rationality of capitalism

eliminates creativity, tension or raw emotion from cultural products, turning them into mundane goods that reinforce the logic of capitalism. As critical theorists, Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer did not intend to paint a totalizing image of society; they protested against ‘one-dimensionalization’ and worked to expose capitalist domination and exploitation in hopes of motivating people to adopt a critical view of the world (in order to enact change and achieve freedom) (Peters 59-60, 64 Kellner xi).

Coolhunting illustrates how instrumental rationality is still at work in contemporary mass consumer society. Coolhunters describe their work as social science-based research which collects information on consumers’ ideas; in reality, coolhunters collect, categorize and feed creative and oppositional meanings to capitalist corporations who then assimilate and exploit them for profit. The phenomenon of coolhunting revives the Frankfurt School’s warnings regarding capitalism’s reliance on scientific management to co-opt and reduce creativity and meanings into a single dimension (the advancement of capitalist domination). As theorists who are critical of instrumental rationality, the observations of the Frankfurt School regarding the ability of capitalism to assimilate individuals and meanings into the cycle of production and consumption are of key interest to this thesis.

Drawing primarily on Adorno and Horkheimer as well as Marcuse’s critique, this chapter sets out the theoretical framework of this thesis by first discussing in detail how instrumental rationality translates into capitalist domination via mass production, increased standards of living, and the scientific management and standardization of

production and consumption. The later portion of the chapter examines the most threatening impacts of instrumental rationality, specifically the co-optation of creativity and oppositional thinking, and how this reduction of meanings represents the potential for the total capitalist domination of mass consumer society. The discussion situates the mass culture critique of the Frankfurt School in the context of present-day advanced capitalism, where culturally-relevant products are no longer limited to media and entertainment. Identifying the limitations of the Frankfurt School's theory within the context of the sign economy, the chapter concludes by setting the stage for further analysis of the continued relevance of these critiques.

Instrumental Rationality and Agency

"A technological rationale is the rationale of domination itself. It is the coercive nature of society alienated from itself." (Adorno and Horkheimer 121)

Before delving into the Frankfurt School's mass culture critique, an overview of the concept of instrumental rationality as well as of agency is required. Alternatively referred to as *instrumental reason* or *technological rationality*, the Frankfurt School's concept of instrumental rationality is complex and multi-layered. In his article, "The Enlightenment and the Birth of Social Science," Peter Hamilton explains that the emergence of instrumental rationality coincided with the age of Enlightenment and the focus on science and reason as the key factors of social and economic progress² (Hamilton 37). David

² Although Hamilton notes that science "was the epitome of enlightenment reason", he also lists a total of ten defining elements of the Enlightenment, as follows: reason, empiricism, science, universalism, progress, individualism, toleration, freedom, uniformity of human nature and secularism (Hamilton 37, 23-24).

Held, in his *Introduction to Critical Theory*, describes how the Frankfurt School viewed the interrelation between the enlightenment, science, and instrumental reason³. Held explains, “The term ‘reason’ becomes synonymous with the process of coordinating means to given ends, or else it appears as a meaningless word. In societies like the present, where instrumental reason is dominant, ‘thinking objectifies itself’” (Held 69). Held also adds that, “The Enlightenment came to its fulfillment with the foundation of modern science – with the mathematization of nature. The new science established a purely rational, ideational world as the only true reality. [. . .] Within this world every object, represented by means of mathematical theorems, became a possible focus of study” (Held 160-161). Held expands on the Frankfurt school’s concerns regarding science and its capacity to study, manage, influence, and control: “Positivistic consciousness objectifies the social as well as the natural world; that is, it conceptualizes the world as a field of objects open to manipulation” (Held 167). Held also notes that the notion of instrumental rationality builds on two key elements of Weber’s concept of ‘rationalization’. The first element is, “The growth in mathematization of ‘experience and knowledge’: the shaping of all science practice according to the model of the natural sciences and the extension of (scientific) rationality to ‘the conduct of life itself’” (Held 65). The second element is how this “secularization of life leads to a growth of means-ends rationality which is evident in the way in which capitalism transforms all social relations into this type of self-interested formula”(Held 65).

³ “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” a seminal chapter from Adorno and Horkheimer’s 1944 book, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, describes the scientific and industrial advancement of the Enlightenment period as a myth with respect to its promises of freedom and progress.

Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse all argued that capitalism “provided a major impetus to further the development of instrumental reason” and consequently, the advancement of capitalism is intertwined with the expansion of instrumental reason (Held 65). As instrumental reason became entrenched in the growth of capitalism, its means-ends rationality became the formula for managing not only raw resources and employees, but consumers as well. The Frankfurt school argued that the Enlightenment embraced scientific reason with the goal of progress and the improvement of quality of life; however, this rationality began to increasingly focus on the means (process) rather than the end of improved life for all humanity. In the context of advanced capitalism, production and economic growth began to develop for their own ends (i.e. for increased profit and corporate success). This exposed the myth that the Enlightenment would bring about an emancipated and just society where individuals would be free to pursue fulfilment and express their creativity. The Frankfurt School suggested that instrumental rationality enables a particular flavour of domination. A form of domination that was readily accepted due to its apparent scientifically-based legitimacy and the comforts and conveniences it offered. As Held explains:

The values of instrumental reason are accorded a privileged status since they are embodied in the concept of rationality itself. [. . .] The dissimilar is recognized and evaluated only as a difference in quantity or efficiency. The individual changes from a ‘unit of resistance and autonomy’ to one of ‘ductility and adjustment’. But the individual’s lack of freedom is not usually experienced as a

lack of freedom. It is not experienced as the work of some outside hostile force.

Rather, liberty is relinquished to the 'dictum of reason itself. Subjective reason is pursued and put to 'profitable' use. (Held 69)

This form of domination is subtle and involves the reduction of human agency in all of its forms – from active resistance to oppositional, creative and unconventional thought.

Neither Adorno and Horkheimer nor Marcuse directly define 'freedom' or 'agency'; however, their descriptions of the characteristics of domination implicitly define what freedom and agency are not. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse explains that, "Technology also provides the great rationalization of the unfreedom of man and demonstrates the 'technical' impossibility of being autonomous, of determining one's own life. For this unfreedom appears neither as irrational nor as political, but rather as submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comforts of life and increases the productivity of labour" (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional* 158). Held explains that Adorno and Horkheimer "do not define the concept of domination. However, as a minimal condition for its application, they suppose a situation in which the thoughts, wants and purposes of those affected by it would have been radically different, if it had not been for the effects created by domination" (Held 149). From both of these characterizations of domination we can extrapolate that freedom implies the ability to exercise agency in terms of independence from capitalism for survival, autonomy of thought and expression, and the capacity for self-determination. Coincidentally, this description is similar to Hall's understanding of agency, which incorporates elements of creativity (free thinking)

and the ability of individuals to express their thoughts and feelings and determine their own history (Procter 38)⁴. To both the Frankfurt School and to Hall, freedom and agency imply independence from the capitalist system as expressed through the capacity for oppositional thought and action and the ability (however limited) to define one's history in their own terms .

Under instrumental rationality, domination not only imposes a certain structure on society and individuals, but it is capable, without the use of coercion, to close-off and prevent forms of agency and resistance. Held describes how:

Human agency, according to this account, can be reduced to a mere support, or a carrier, of general social structures. Frankfurt social theory [. . .] clearly implied that in capitalist societies this process of reduction was well underway. [. . .] If individuals wish to survive they must adapt their lives to these processes and become agents and bearers of commodity exchange. (Held 168)

Similarly, John Durham Peters elaborates on the notion of a 'legitimized' domination, noting that, "It is not simply that people are duped: they are active agents in their own duping" (Peters 64).

⁴ See also the introductory chapter for discussion of Hall's concept of agency.

Mass Production, Increased Standards of Living and the Acceptance of 'Unfreedom'

Peters explains that Adorno and Horkheimer's seminal work, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, describes how "mass culture serves as an organ of soft domination, as the latest twist in a tale of how the quest for emancipation enslaved us. Though the chapter [on the culture industry] specifically discusses film, music, radio, and advertising, its overall aim is to explain how the dream of enlightenment backfired" (Peters 63). Peters is careful to underscore that Adorno and Horkheimer's theory "Attacks the standardization of cultural objects, not commercial production of culture" (Peters 64). What the Frankfurt School are concerned with is how the capitalist logic of instrumental rationality eliminates creativity, emotion and authenticity from mass produced cultural products and turns them into uninspiring distractions that inhibit individual agency. Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer protest this form of standardization of messages and meanings which occurs under conditions of capitalist mass production of culture. These types of cultural products (be they movies, music, or clothing) lack the authenticity, diversity, depth or complexity necessary for individual expression, or for inspiring thought or reaction. The capitalist mass production of culture, under the logic of instrumental rationality, serves as a distraction from oppositional or creative thinking. It diverts individual attention from questioning existing circumstances and exploring possible alternatives and reinforces the capitalist hegemony. Although the notion of hegemony is typically associated with cultural studies, this concept subtly appears in the works of the Frankfurt School. As Peters points out, the Frankfurt School "spots something trickier than class domination: it

is an active collaboration with industrialized culture, and hence closer to Gramsci and cultural studies than traditional Marxism” (Peters 64).

The Frankfurt School argued that consumers accepted, if not welcomed, capitalist technological advancement because of its promises of increased standards of living. Adorno and Horkheimer explain that, “It is claimed that standards were based in the first place on consumers’ needs, and for that reason were accepted with so little resistance” (Adorno and Horkheimer 121). Although they agreed that mass production in some ways has improved everyday life, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that under instrumental reason it ultimately incorporates the individual and threatens the capacity for agency and freedom in advanced capitalist consumer societies. They indicate that “The result is the cycle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows ever stronger” adding that the “standard of life enjoyed corresponds very closely to the degree to which classes and individuals are essentially bound up with the system” (Adorno and Horkheimer 121, 150). Marcuse also warned of the freedom-limiting impacts of the comforts of a heightened standard of living combined with the bureaucratic and scientific management of workers and consumers within capitalist mass consumer society. He describes how, “Under the rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole” (Marcuse 2). He explains that consumers’ increased reliance on mass produced goods reinforced unquestioning acceptance of the system that provides these services and products:

Communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life – much better than before – and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. (Marcuse 12)

As consumers grew increasingly dependent on mass produced goods, they became more unquestioningly entrenched within the cycle of consumption. Capitalist hegemony thus became stronger. The comfort, convenience and sheer volume of available mass produced goods, combined with their built-in obsolescence, impede the ability of individuals to critically assess and resist the capitalist system of production. Consumers willingly exchange freedom of independent thought and leisure time for this new standard of living; “Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behaviour* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe.” (Marcuse 12).

Douglas Kellner describes Marcuse's work as a critique of new modes of domination and social control articulated in a theory of advanced industrial society where "changes in production, consumption, culture, and thought have produced an advanced state of conformity in which the production of needs and aspirations by the prevailing societal apparatus integrates individuals into the established societies" (Kellner xii). To Marcuse, culture that is mass produced under instrumental rationality results in the 'one-dimensionalization' of thought. On the individual level, one-dimensionalization abets conformity and a lack of creative opposition. On a societal level, one-dimensionalization manifests itself in the closing off, or assimilation, of oppositional discourse.

The convenience afforded by the increased standard of living that resulted from mass production also translated into increased leisure time for individuals. The myth of the Enlightenment promised emancipation, including freedom from toil and more time for the individual pursuit of fulfilment and self-expression (Peters 63). Instead, private leisure time has become time for consumption of mass produced cultural products. Rather than permitting repose from work and consumption, leisure now only reinforces and furthers capitalist interests and individuals' dependence on the system. Kellner explains: "Technology restructures labour and leisure, influencing life from the organization of labour to modes of thought" (Kellner xii). The capitalist means of production have an unprecedented power to make workers into consumers, and vice-versa. As Adorno and Horkheimer explain, instrumental rationality has not only blurred the lines between work and leisure, but between classes as well. It has:

Made the technology of the culture industry no more than the achievement of standardization and mass production, sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system. This is the result not of a law of movement in technology as such but of its function in today's economy. The need which might resist central control has already been suppressed by the control of the individual consciousness. (Adorno and Horkheimer 121-122)

Adorno and Horkheimer and Marcuse observe that increased standards of living, and corresponding increases in leisure time, have allowed for capitalist mass produced culture to enter the private lives and thoughts of individuals. The individual has already been integrated into the capitalist system in the workplace, but now, even in private leisure, the individual becomes a consumer, permitting the culture industry to distract, influence and limit thought, creativity and agency. The individual, as full-time consumer, is left with increasingly limited mental space to question or resist the capitalist hegemony.

Adorno and Horkheimer use the abstract term 'culture industry' in reference to the capitalist production of culture as well as the management of mass consumption. The culture industry evolves from the logic of instrumental reason. As Held explains,

The culture industry produces for mass consumption and significantly contributes to the determination of that consumption. For people are now being treated as objects, machines, 'outside as well as inside the workshops'. The consumer, as the producer, has no sovereignty. The culture industry, integrated into capitalism,

in turn integrates consumers from above. Its goal is the production of goods that are profitable and consumable. It operates to ensure its own reproduction. (Held 91)

The Frankfurt School also assess the dangers of the co-optation of creativity and art that occurs with the capitalist mass production of culture. Held elaborates on this critique, noting how creativity and art have become tools of capitalist hegemony rather than modes of self-expression, creativity, catharsis and opposition:

The protagonists of the present distribution of power and property, harnessing the endogenous forces which centralize ownership and control, employ economic, political and cultural means to defend the *status quo*. As a result, most areas of cultural life become co-opted and transformed into modes of controlling individual consciousness. Simultaneously, culture becomes an 'industry'. The profit motive is transferred on to cultural form; more and more artistic [creative] products are turned into a 'species of commodity. . . marketable and interchangeable like an industrial product'. (Held 90)

Marcuse discusses this form of co-optation at length. To him, art inherently represents a cathartic expression of individual experience and ideas which in some way do not conform to hegemonic values. As he states, a closing-off of discourse occurs where:

This essential gap between the arts and the order of the day, kept open in the artistic alienation, is progressively closed by the advancing technological society. And with its closing, the Great refusal is in turn refused; the 'other dimension' is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs. The works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society [. . .]. Thus they become commercials – they sell, comfort, or excite. (Marcuse 64)

Culture and meanings no longer exist in and of themselves, or for the individuals who generate them, but rather are assimilated in the name of profit. As a result of this “materialization of ideals” the complex and oppositional meanings represented in art are narrowed, depleted and rendered powerless (Marcuse 58). To Marcuse, the co-optation of art is the ultimate achievement of control by instrumental rationality that supports the capitalist hegemony. This control, “increasingly establishes a (false) harmony between public and private interests; reinforces privatization and consumption orientations; spreads an advertising aesthetic; undermines indigenous working-class culture; increases the domination of instrumental reason; and, manipulates sexuality – leading to the general pursuit of false and limited wants and needs, repressive desublimation” (Held 108)⁵. Once assimilated by the culture industry, the Frankfurt School argue that these ideas lose their authenticity, both in terms of their capacity as vehicles of cathartic release as well as their ability to challenge capitalist hegemony. This process turns opposition

⁵ It is worth noting here that the Frankfurt School does not condemn all commercial exchange of culture and art for monetary gain; what they object to is the reduction of art into ‘standardized’, repetitive and meaningless commodities (Peters 64). Peters indicates that it is the particular limitation of creativity and authentic emotion, and not the assignment of exchange value to culture, that particularly concerns Adorno and Horkheimer.

into simple play and irony, where even seemingly contradictory ideas are so diluted and compromised that they no longer pose any threat to capitalist hegemony. As Marcuse states, “this new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truth peacefully coexist in indifference” (Marcuse 61). According to the Frankfurt School, standardized culture lacks both emotional authenticity and diversity of meaning – it neither challenges nor enhances individuals or society, nor does it offer any avenues for creativity or resistance.

Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse narrowly identify ‘high-art’ and folk art as the only art-forms that can represent the “Great Refusal” – the ultimate form of individual resistance (both through the individual experience of production, exposure and personal reaction to authentic high-art) to the capitalist order. Marcuse explains, “art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal – the protest against that which is” (Marcuse 63). Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer state, “the irreconcilable elements of culture, art and distraction are subordinated to one end and subsumed under one false formula: the totality of the culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer 136). Under the logic of instrumental rationality, self-expression, creativity, and the exploration of possibilities (the inherent characteristics of art) are managed and manipulated into capitalist mass production. Local and folk art are also assimilated under instrumental rationality because of the simple physical and fantastical emancipation that they inherently represent (Peters 68). Held explains that, like high art, “The meaning of local and folk culture is also often destroyed, because pride and rebelliousness embedded within it are taken out of context, repeated in special programmes, and often integrated

into the latest fashions” (Held 91). Although it is debatable whether the Frankfurt School would view youth subcultures as a type of local or folk art, their critique can be applied to describe and explain the fate of the subcultures that coolhunting helps to co-opt.

The Frankfurt School argue that instrumental rationality has not only harnessed culture as a resource for the perpetuation of capitalism, but that the culture that is lived and experienced in advanced capitalist societies is limited to the consumption of what is offered by capitalist manufacturers. Adorno and Horkheimer describe this cycle, stating that “By craftily sanctioning the demand for rubbish it inaugurates total harmony. The connoisseur and the expert are despised for their pretentious claim to know better than the others, even though culture is democratic and distributes its privileges to all. In view of the ideological truce, the conformism of the buyers and the effrontery of the producers who supply them prevail; the result is a constant reproduction of the same thing” (Adorno and Horkheimer 134). The great effort dedicated to the scientific management of production and consumption yields capitalist producers’ unprecedented control and power where, “The producers are experts. The idiom demands an astounding productive power, which it absorbs and squanders. In a diabolical way it has overreached the culturally conservative distinction between genuine and artificial style. [. . .] in the culture industry every element of subject matter has its origin in the same apparatus as that jargon whose stamp it bears” (Adorno and Horkheimer 129).

The Frankfurt School argued that the impacts of instrumental rationality run much wider than the production and consumption of mass produced goods. In one-dimensional

society, the possibilities of different ways of life are obscured and human agency is pre-empted. The work of the Frankfurt School warns us that “The ruthless unity in the culture industry is evidence of what will happen in politics” Adorno and Horkheimer 123). In addition to its capacity to incorporate opposition, instrumental rationality destroys individuals’ capacity for critical and oppositional thought. Because of its control of cultural production and its penetration into private life, instrumental rationality is also able to influence not only individuals’ consumption, but also their political opinions and agency. Kellner explains that,

In Marcuse’s analysis, ‘one-dimensional man’ has lost, or is losing, individuality, freedom, and the ability to dissent and control one’s own destiny. The private space, the dimension of negation and individuality, in which one may become and remain a self, is being whittled away by a society which shapes aspirations, hopes, fears, and values, and even manipulates vital needs. [. . .] The price that one-dimensional man pays for satisfaction is to surrender freedom and individuality. [. . .] Lacking the power of authentic self-activity, one-dimensional man submits increasingly to total domination. (Kellner xxvii-xxviii)

Held summarizes the Frankfurt School’s observations, stating: “A number of factors have, however, conjoined to bring about the present general impotency of critical thought. [. . .] This introversion of authority reinforces and sustains modes of behaviour that are adaptive, passive and acquiescent” (Held 69). Influenced and controlled by

instrumental rationality, individuals are no longer capable of critically assessing their circumstances, nor are they able to think ‘negatively’ to imagine alternate possibilities.

Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School

It is important to remember that despite the bleakness of their critiques, the intent of the Frankfurt School scholars is not to paint a totalizing view of industrialized society. As critical theorists, their works draws attention to threats to freedom, creativity, and critical thought that are posed by instrumental rationality with the aim of preventing total capitalist domination. The Frankfurt School’s writings include a glimmer of hope when they call on everyday individuals, activists and scholars to exercise their capacity for critical and oppositional thought and action. Kellner explains that:

Indeed, there is a recurrent tendency in reading Marcuse to use ‘one-dimensionality’ as a totalizing concept to describe an era of historical development which supposedly absorbs all opposition into a totalitarian, monolithic system. However, Marcuse himself rarely, if ever, uses the term ‘one-dimensionality’ (i.e. as a totalizing noun,) but instead tends to speak of ‘one-dimensional’ man, society, or thought, applying the terms as an adjective describing deficient conditions which he criticizes and contrasts with an alternative state [. . .] It is wrong to read him solely as a theorist of the totally administered society who completely rejects contradiction, conflict, revolt and alternative thought and action. (Kellner *xxvi*)

As Kellner indicates, the Frankfurt School's analysis of contemporary society is not wholly deterministic or entirely lacking in individual potential for resistance; nevertheless, their perception of mass-produced popular culture and the culture industry remains highly critical. The Frankfurt School do not believe that consumers are cultural dupes who purchase anything that is marketed to them; indeed, they observe how the capitalist culture industry invests greatly into mitigating the risks of producing culturally-relevant goods. Coolhunting illustrates how corporations attempt to mitigate such risks by intercepting (at a very early stage) trends that are anticipated to diffuse across a consumer population. The Frankfurt School's critiques remain relevant in this context where "What is new about the phase of mass culture compared with the late liberal stage is the exclusion of the new. The machine rotates on the same spot. While determining consumption it excludes the untried as a risk" (Adorno and Horkheimer 134). Nevertheless, the capacity for resistance to the capitalist hegemony exists somewhere outside of the cycle of capitalist mass production and consumption where meanings, desires and opinions can only be manipulated, limited, or exploited. In Marcuse's words:

The growing productivity of labor creates an increasing surplus-product which, whether privately or centrally appropriated and distributed, allows and an increased consumption – notwithstanding the increased diversion of productivity. As long as this constellation prevails, it reduces the use-value of freedom; there is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the 'good' life. This is the rational and material ground for the unification of opposites, for one-dimensional political behaviour. On this ground,

the transcending political forces *within* society are arrested, and qualitative change appears possible only as a change from *without*. (Marcuse 49)

Although the Frankfurt School hold on to hope for change, they reject the possibility that any form of creativity or resistance can occur within the realm of consumption of mass produced culture.

Assessing the Ongoing Relevance of the Frankfurt School

Although the Frankfurt School scholars based their analysis on the culture industry they observed a half-century ago, many of their insights and warnings remain relevant, if not more pressing, today. Coolhunting is but one example of the persistence of the logic of instrumental rationality within present day capitalism. As Peters notes, “Though one might shy away from Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s doctrine of a closed system of production, their sense of the ways in which feedback from audiences is built into production is more relevant today, with our focus groups and psychographics, than it was in the 1940s” (Peters 70). Coolhunting represents a present-day example of instrumental rationality in terms of its: ‘scientific’ approach (i.e. its claim of conducting ethnographic research); its categorization and simplification of consumers’ styles and meanings; and, the manner in which it assists in the co-optation (assimilation) and the manipulation of consumers. By pre-emptively incorporating emerging trends before they can naturally diffuse through the population, coolhunting ‘integrates consumers from above.’ It co-opts creativity and treats individuals as resources. Even the subcultures’ space ‘outside the workshop,’ is assimilated in favour of capitalism. The Frankfurt School do not claim

that the capitalist system (or the culture industry) is able to so manipulate individuals and their social environment as to render them mindless consuming dupes (Peters 64).

However, they warn that the instrumental rationality of the culture industry creates conditions where the lack of discomfort negates motivation for resistance. Instrumental rationality, and its use of scientific management, ensures that little space remains for individuals to develop ideas that may oppose the capitalist hegemony. And if those ideas appear, they are quickly incorporated into the system. As Held explains “The decline of critical thought is also furthered by the incorporation of opposition. Opposition has been rendered increasingly ineffective because the representatives of the ‘forces of negativity’ – although they have not lost the ‘title of opposition’ – have all too often become mimics of the dominant apparatus” (Held 69-70). Coolhunting serves as an example of how not only the production process, but also consumers and meanings, are scientifically managed and incorporated into production and consumption.

Instead of employing creative design staff, present-day producers of culturally relevant goods use coolhunters to harvest ideas from youth subcultures. Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of how scientific management of consumers reduces individuals to quantifiable and categorized resources applies to the practice of coolhunting as much as it did to Frankfurt School’s analysis of culture industry:

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films [. . .] depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers.

Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are

emphasized and extended. [. . .] Consumers appear as statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green and blue areas. The technique that is used for any type of propaganda. (Adorno and Horkheimer 123)

Scientific management and standardization are applied not only to raw resources and produced goods but also to individuals (consumers) who are carefully managed and produced (i.e. observed, tracked, categorized) to ensure they consume and accept the capitalist hegemony. In other words, "Industry is interested in people merely as customers and employees, and has in fact reduced mankind as a whole and each of its elements to this all-embracing formula (Adorno and Horkheimer 147). Products are made not to respond to consumers' needs and desires, but rather, consumers are managed, formed and influenced to favorably respond to products (Peters 66).

At the level of the individual, the Frankfurt School argued that instrumental rationality attempts to categorize and control people's identity, in particular their identity as consumers. As Adorno and Horkheimer explain, "In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of productions. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned. Pseudo individuality is rife" (Adorno and Horkheimer 154). Marcuse describes a similar standardization of the individual:

To be sure, these characters have not disappeared from the literature of advanced industrial society, but they survive essentially transformed. The vamp, the national hero, the beatnik, the neurotic housewife, the gangster, the star, the charismatic tycoon perform a function very different from and even contrary to their cultural predecessors. They are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks to types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than negation of the established order. (Marcuse 59)

Under the logic of instrumental rationality the individual is tolerated only as a category that can be used to advance or reinforce capitalist hegemony. For example, in coolhunting, an individual showing original character or thought is studied and categorized so as to assimilate them into the capitalist system. Coolhunting exemplifies Adorno and Horkheimer's warnings of how "any trace of spontaneity from the public [. . .] is controlled and absorbed by talent scouts, studio competitions and official programs of every kind [. . .] Talented performers belong to the industry long before it displays them" (Adorno and Horkheimer 122). The Frankfurt School argue that once co-opted by capitalist producers, individuals and the meanings they live by, become commodities and lose their oppositional power. In other words, "Anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in. Once his particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted by the industry, he belongs to it as does the land-reformer to capitalism" (Adorno and Horkheimer 132). Under instrumental rationality emerging oppositional ideas are robbed of their critical power and assimilated into in the interest of profit. As further analysis in this thesis will show, coolhunting facilitates this form of standardization and enclosure.

Despite their powerful insights and continued relevance, the Frankfurt School's perspective is limited. As Peters states, their "fundamental interests are production and product, not consumption; their aim is philosophical critique not ethnographic research" (Peters 66). Their focus on the limiting and exploitative characteristics of capitalist mass production prevented them from exploring mass consumption as a site of struggle where individuals could question, negotiate, or resist capitalist hegemony. Peters, in particular, critiques Adorno and Horkheimer's assumption that a society consists solely of the culture which is mass produced. He argues that "The ["Culture Industry"] chapter's great weakness is the conflation of culture and society. [. . .] One could read their absence of social analysis charitably as a methodological choice. Less sympathetically, one could argue that they find questions of audiences and reception irrelevant, since they believe that social conditions simply mimic cultural and economic ones" (Peters 66-67). Peters adds that Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* fails to address issues of the fallibility of communication and audience perceptions/interpretation and that it reads:

Social homogenization (audiences) from cultural homogeneity (products), a major shortcoming for thinkers raised in Stuart Hall's claim that encoding and decoding need have nothing to do with each other. Moreover, [it] can seem guilty of the indecency of telling people what they think or should think, of showing a basic lack of respect for what people might find in cultural objects. (Peters 67)

Furthermore, Peters argues that mass production of culture has evolved in the decades since the works of the Frankfurt School were published. He indicates that, in comparison

to what Adorno and Horkheimer observed over 50 years ago, “The culture industries today are more complicated; concentration of ownership can go together with decentralization of decision making, flexible production, and niche marketing. Homogeneity is less the rule than incorporation of irony and resistance. The notion of mass culture as a single bloc connecting industry, text, and audience is defunct” (Peters 69-70).

The gaps in Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments have become particularly significant in the contemporary context, where meaning-making is recognized as an important element of both the production and the consumption of commodities that range far beyond television, music and film. In order to further assess the relevance of Frankfurt School’s critique today, it is important to recognize the evolving concept of the ‘culture industry’. The particularities of how capitalism has evolved since the time of the Frankfurt School’s writing are explicated by Scott Lash and John Urry, for example, in their book, *Economies of Signs and Space*. In contrast to the Frankfurt School, Lash and Urry suggest that, in the present-day late capitalism, the roles of objects and subjects have changed, rendering a ‘disorganized’ capitalism where all consumer goods carry sign value, and are thus increasingly culturally relevant. In disorganized capitalism production is “fragmented and flexible” (Lash and Urry 2). In this context, the “circuits of commodities, productive capital and money qualitatively stretch to become international in terms of increases in global trade, foreign direct investment and global movements of finance,” and, objects and subjects now circulate over greater distances at increasing

speeds (Lash and Urry 2). Lash and Urry explain that objects in contemporary political economies:

Are not just emptied out of symbolic content. They are also progressively emptied out of material content. What is increasingly produced are not material objects but *signs*. These signs are primarily of two types. Either they have a primarily cognitive component and thus are post-industrial or informational goods. Or they primarily have an aesthetic, in the broadest sense of the aesthetic, content and they are primarily postmodern goods. This is occurring, not just in the proliferation of non-material objects which comprise a substantial aesthetic component [. . .], but also in the increasing component of sign value or image in *material* objects. (Lash and Urry 15)

Notably, Lash and Urry's discussion echoes Klein's observations of how present-day multinational corporations increasingly value branding and the layering of meaning over labour and production (Klein 21).

In disorganized capitalism, even tangible material objects are valued primarily for their aesthetics and layers of "of sign-value or image" (Lash and Urry 4). Lipovetsky's discussion of how clothing has lost its symbolic value as a status symbol and now is laden with imagery (signs) of youthfulness, difference and cool, reflects this reality. Like Klein, Lash and Urry point to the increased onus that companies place on marketing, advertising, and the design of goods, from clothes and shoes to cars and furniture.

Increasingly, corporations are no longer the actual producers of the physical products (objects); particularly, in sectors such as “culture industries, some high tech, clothing – so much of actual production is outsourced to other firms that erstwhile manufacturing companies come to take on more the role of business and finance services and providers of R & D rather than manufacturing proper” (Lash and Urry 24). The key function of corporations and brands is, thus, the layering of signs onto objects, and no longer consists of the physical production of goods (work which is typically contracted to offshore subsidiaries).

According to Lash and Urry, the dominant critique of postmodern consumer capitalism argues that “With an ever quickening turnover time, objects as well as cultural artefacts become disposable and depleted of meanings. Some of these objects [. . .] produce many more cultural artefacts or signs (‘signifiers’) than people can cope with. People are bombarded with signifiers and increasingly become incapable of attaching ‘signifieds’ or meanings to them” (Lash and Urry 3). Present day capitalism destroys meanings by expeditiously co-opting and commodifying them, and then just as quickly rendering them obsolete. However, as Lash and Urry explain:

The sort of ‘economies of sign and space’ that became pervasive in the wake of organized capitalism do not just lead to increasing meaninglessness, homogenizations, abstraction, anomie and the destruction of the subject. Another set of radically divergent processes is simultaneously taking place. These

processes may open up possibilities for the recasting of meaning in work and leisure. (Lash and Urry 3)

Specifically, Lash and Urry point to what they call an “increasingly significant reflexive human subjectivity,” that occurs at both an individual and organizational level. They argue that “This aestheticization of material objects can take place either in the production or in the circulation and consumption of goods” (Lash and Urry 15). Rather than becoming overwhelmed or desensitised to the ‘signifieds’, subjects now show an increasingly reflexive response to aesthetic and sign-laden objects. According to Lash and Urry, “If cognitive reflexivity is a matter of ‘monitoring’ of self, and of social-structural roles and resources, then aesthetic reflexivity entails self *interpretation* and the interpretation of social background practices” (Lash and Urry 5). In his review of the Lash and Urry’s book, Michael Biddulph explains that “The critical, and aesthetically reflexive, consumer plays the game of tourism, interpreting the landscape of multiple signs, and knowing that there in [*sic*] no ‘authentic’ experience” (Biddulph 1788). In this postmodern social and economic context, which coolhunting was born into, consumers are the playful tourists, who, despite the design and marketing efforts of corporations, explore, sample, wander, and create their own meanings and identities as they journey through the world of consumer goods. Because such a broad range of goods are laden with meaning, an account of the role of consumers, as readers and interpreters (encoders/decoders) of these meanings, is essential to moving beyond the limitations of the Frankfurt School’s warnings. The following chapter explores several theoretical frameworks that help us do just this. At the same time, however, we must keep in mind,

as Peters does, that moving beyond does not mean abandoning the Frankfurt School.

Thus, as one final statement to conclude this chapter, it is useful to bear in mind Peters' comments on the lasting legacy of the theoretical contributions of the Frankfurt School's work:

'The Culture Industry' offers a package deal: both a critique of domination and a quest, hoping against hope, for freedom. It is this double project that is highly suggestive for media studies today. Horkheimer and Adorno do not countenance the false, and by now tired, dichotomy of either audience resistance or industrial manipulation. Before the fact, they blend the best of political economy (analytic tools for exposing concentrated power) and cultural studies (appreciation for the protest hidden in small gestures [. . .]) Ironically, thinkers who reject the Frankfurt School for its dour view of human agency in order to celebrate the emancipatory potentials of popular culture unwittingly walk in paths they fancy they are rejecting, reinventing the utopian half of the Frankfurt analysis without its necessary sober counterweight. (Peters 59-60)

2 – The Circuit of Culture Model

“Cultural strategies that can make a difference, that’s what I’m interested in – those that can make a difference and can shift the dispositions of power.” (Hall, “What is Black” 468)

Stuart Hall’s work presents a cautiously optimistic approach to the study of popular culture. Hall recognizes the merits of studying all forms of culture and their consumption, including the ordinary (mundane) mass-produced and mass-marketed culture, not only as an important component of everyday life, but as a site for agency and resistance against capitalist hegemony. Hall’s circuit of culture model examines the flow of communication between the producers of culturally-relevant goods and consumers, thus permitting a new appreciation of popular culture consumption as a potential site for struggle and resistance against capitalist hegemony. Cultural studies challenges the Frankfurt School’s conflation of mass produced culture with society (Peters 66-67), arguing that culture must be understood as “an autonomous set of meanings and practices with its own logic,” and with its own opportunities for active audience interpretation to the mass produced goods they consume on a daily basis (Baker 64-65).

Hall is often identified as the father of British cultural studies (Rojek 8-9). Hall’s contributions to cultural studies and communications range widely⁶, but here my focus is

⁶ Hall’s work covers a variety of roles and topics: his work as a Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (the BCCC, often described as the cradle of the cultural studies field); his contributions to the study of audience and mass communication; to his writings on Marxist theory and active involvement with the New Left; as well as his work on questions of race and identity.

on Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication, which eventually evolved into the circuit of culture model. The chapter first provides an overview of Hall's philosophical approach to cultural and communications studies and then examines his encoding/decoding theory. The discussion then delves into the circuit of culture model, exploring its viability as a theoretical tool for reconciling the cautionary words of the Frankfurt School with a postmodern reality that demands recognition of the potential for resistance within the realm of popular culture. The chapter concludes by identifying the need for further application and analysis of the circuit model to fully assess whether its arguments constitute a valid critical theoretical response to the Frankfurt School's critique.

Hall – Philosophical/Theoretical Approach

In their respective books, James Procter and Chris Rojek summarize Hall's career, influences and impact over the past several decades. Procter argues that Hall's work, like that of the Frankfurt School, falls very much within the critical theory tradition, where the practice of social science aims not simply to critique and observe, but to mobilize and effect change. He notes that "Hall is not interested in a static, monolithic object of study called 'Theory'. He is interested in theory as intervention, as action" (Procter 54). In all his work, Hall sees interconnectedness between different disciplines and theories, as well as diverse practices and cultural activities.

Hall views culture as consisting of shared meanings transmitted through a 'language' of signs and systems, which include a vast range of cultural products, including music, images, written word, and, crucially, *objects*. For Hall, all types of interactions are significant because "the question of meaning arises in relation to *all* the different moments or practices in our 'cultural circuit' – in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct." (Hall, "Representation" 4). Rather than defining boundaries and limitations, Hall thinks in terms of linkages, relationships and influences. Jennifer Daryl Slack highlights Hall's application of the concept of articulation (the linking together of concepts or theories), explaining: "He resists the temptation of reduction to class, mode of production, structure, as well as to culturalism's tendency to reduce culture to 'experience'. [. . .] His willingness to engage different philosophical and political traditions in theorizing articulation has meant that his influence is quite widespread" (Slack 121).

To Hall, the study of culture is interconnected with "matters of power and politics, to the need for change and to representations of and 'for' marginalized social groups" (Baker 5). As will be discussed in detail, Hall's models of communication strive to account for, and accept, the power and breadth of the influence of corporate producers of culturally-relevant goods, while recognizing consumers' capacity to decode/encode (interpret and create) meanings in ways that can actively challenge capitalist hegemony. Lawrence Grossberg, explains, "For Hall, all human practices (including communication and communication theory) are struggles to 'make history but in conditions not of our own

making” (Grossberg, *History, Politics and Postmodernism* 153). Where the Frankfurt School avoid venturing into the realm of audience studies and reception, Hall’s encoding/decoding and circuit of culture models suggest that, within the context of mass production and consumption of culture, much space remains for individual agency.

Hall’s approach exhibits a balance between the Frankfurt School’s focus on mass cultural production, and a tempered and realistic recognition that small acts of resistance are possible, even under the capitalist mass production of culture. Hall constantly strives to maintain this balance by recognizing and crediting the individual consumer’s capacity for agency, without compromising his critical assessment of the power and influence held by the culture industry. In Hall’s view, perfect hegemony could only occur if meanings where entirely ‘transparent’ and consumers exercised no agency:

To be perfectly hegemonic is to have every meaning that you want to communicate understood by the audience only in that way. [...] no blips on the screen, just a totally passive audience. [...] I don’t believe that the message has any one meaning. So I want to get a notion of a power and structuring in the encoding moment, which, nevertheless, does not wipe out all the other possible meanings. (Hall, “Reflections” 262)

Hall adds that preferred reading is “never fully successful, but it is the exercise of power in the attempt to hegemonize the reading” (Hall, “Reflections” 262). Of course, Hall recognizes that the capacity of consumers to encode/decode meanings does not put them

on a level playing field with producers, but that it offers individuals a space to push back against the efforts of what the Frankfurt School would call the *one-dimensionalizing* effects of instrumental rationality. He writes:

I don't want a model which is determinist, but I don't want a model without determination. And therefore I don't think audiences are in the same positions of power with those who signify the world to them. And preferred reading is simply a way of saying if you have control of the apparatus of the signifying world, if you're in control of the media, you own it, you write the text – to some extent it has a determining shape. Your decodings are going to take place somewhere within the universe of encoding. One is trying to enclose the other. Transparency between the encoding and decoding moments is what I would call the moment of hegemony. (Hall, "Reflections" 261-262)

In one form or another, nearly all of Hall's work is conscious of struggles for power, which he argues exist in all instances of cultural activities. Unlike the Frankfurt School, who focus their analysis on the power of instrumental rationality held by capitalist producers, "For Hall, the study of culture involves exposing the relations of power that exist within society at any given moment in order to consider how marginal, or subordinate, groups might secure or win, however temporarily, cultural space from the dominant group" (Procter 2).

To understand Hall's work, we need to understand the concept of hegemony, the ongoing process of making, reproducing and maintaining a dominant ideology. According to Lawrence Grossberg, hegemony is:

A constant process by which the dominant class alliance wins the consent of the dominated classes by creating representations of reality that are taken as reality itself. Hegemony is a continuous struggle to dominate through consent rather than coercion, through representation rather than falsification, through legitimation rather than manipulation. In the struggle for hegemony, representations of reality are offered in place of the real and come to be taken as reality, and thus they provide the natural and reasonable limits of 'common sense.' (Grossberg, 151-152)

The notion of hegemony implies continuous struggle between hegemonic groups (i.e. the group holding power, such as the capitalist manufacturers of culture) and subordinate groups (the consumers and workers and their respective cultures). In this struggle, the dominant group constantly reasserts itself in order to maintain authority, influence and leadership.

Hall's interest in power is motivated by his desire to identify avenues for human agency. Because Hall pays so much attention to human agency, focusing on the ability of individuals and cultures to negotiate space in order to resist and influence capitalist hegemony in the context of popular culture, he remains constantly hopeful about the

potential for resistance to capitalist hegemony, particularly in comparison to the Frankfurt School.

Encoding/Decoding – Unpacking the Theoretical Underpinnings of the Circuit of Culture Model

Hall's encoding/decoding model recognizes that the mass production of culturally-relevant goods is not "a one-sided process which governs how all events will be signified. It consists of the 'work' required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a *decoding* of the event within the limit of the dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified" (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 99). In his seminal "Encoding, Decoding" essay, Hall established the theoretical underpinning of the circuit of culture model. Procter elaborates on the significance of this work as follows:

The emphasis on 'struggle' here is central to Hall's essay and ultimately signals the impact of Gramsci. The concepts of 'hegemony' and 'common-sense' allow Hall to move beyond the binaristic stranglehold: *either* culturalism *or* structuralism. 'Encoding/decoding' argues that televisual discourse plays a key ideological role in reproducing and securing, by *consent* rather than force, the values and meanings of the dominant cultural order. However, these dominant or preferred meanings are always open to *contestation* and transformation as they are made to signify otherwise. The media do not express ideology in this context, rather the media becomes a site of ideological struggle. (Procter 72)

Hall explains the different challenges that he was trying to respond to, including: one, the linear sender-receiver model of communications, which assumes that message are “perfectly transparent” to the receiver, and overlooks the complexity of meanings incorporated into a message; two, a political context which calls into question the “overdeterminist” model of communication; and three, neo-Marxist discussions of the base-superstructure model of ideology in an effort to elaborate on Marx’s notions of a circuit of production (Hall, “Reflections 253-255).

Hall’s “Encoding, decoding” essay challenged the orthodoxy of communication models that assumed that the processes of communication follow a neat, sequential order (sender/message/receiver) (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 90-91). However, by using the Marxist terminology of production and (re)production, Hall shifted the status of the recipient of the message from a passive ‘receiver’ to a subject who actively (re)produces the message by interpreting it in his or her own terms. As Procter elaborates:

The ‘sender’ has become a ‘producer’ and the ‘receiver’ a ‘consumer’. Where to ‘receive’ has passive connotations in mass communications research, marking the end of the communication process, to consume is an *active* process leading to the production, or ‘*reproduction*’ of meaning. [. . .] What is being proposed here is an *articulated* [. . .] model of communication in which meaning does not reside at, nor can be guaranteed by, any particular moment of the circuit. (Procter 61)

Employing television messages as a case-study, Hall's essay presents a new model of communication which draws attention to power relations within the context of mass produced culture. As he explains:

Traditionally, mass communications research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity — for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations. (Hall "Encoding, decoding" 90-91)

Hall recognizes that consumers not only actively interpret, or decode, the messages they receive, but that they also possess the capacity to encode new meanings. This draws attention to the political significance of all human interactions and behaviours in the realm of consumption, all of which Hall recognizes as connected and interactive forms of communication (Slack 123-124). In this sense, the concept of 'articulation' refers to the connectivity between moments of production and consumption of messages and meanings. These 'transfers' of information engage participants in dialogue, as well as a struggle for hegemony, where each participant endeavours to convey their preferred meanings within the messages.

Hall describes the encoding/decoding process as a "complex structure in dominance" which, nevertheless, still holds on to the possibility that the sender's ability to fully

determine, or 'fix', the meaning of a message can be undermined and resisted (Hall, "Encoding, decoding 91). As Hall explains,

While each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next [. . .]. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the 'passage of forms' on whose continuity the flow of effective productions (that is 'reproduction') depends. (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 91)

Hall's encoding/decoding model consists of four separate but articulated stages, or moments, which form a circuit of communication: production, circulation, consumption/distribution, and reproduction. Although each stage has the capacity to influence interpretation and action at the subsequent stage, no one moment in this model has the power to fully determine or control how meaning is decoded in the following stage.

Production

At the moment of *production*, the initial meaning is encoded into a cultural product. The message can take the form of any number of cultural products, from media (e.g. television news and programming, print, music or movies), to those products that have been more recently recognized as culturally-relevant (e.g. clothing, cellular phones, portable music players, personal computers, etc) (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 91-93).

Circulation, Consumption/Distribution

The *circulation* stage occurs in the discursive form where the product is perceived by the recipient audience. A broadcast product (e.g. a news story) does not automatically affect its audience, as the broadcasting of a message represents only the circulation stage of the circuit. The actual stage of *consumption* does not take place until meaning is taken-up and interpreted (decoded) by the recipient. In other words, “If no ‘meaning’ is taken there can be no ‘consumption’” (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 91).

Reproduction

In this stage the decoded meaning is reproduced by a recipient according to their own identity and decoding position. Consumption happens when meaning is derived and incorporated into an individual’s behaviour and subsequently is communicated back into the circuit. Hall’s words, “If no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no consumption. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect” (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 91).

The ability of consumers to actively encode/decode meanings forms the basis for agency and resistance in both the encoding/decoding and, later, the circuit of culture model. (Procter 59-62). The production of the news story, however, marks the starting point in the encoding/decoding circuit. As Hall explains:

The institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations and technical infrastructures, are required to produce a programme. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense,

then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect: it too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas. (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 92)

Hall does not ignore the influences and discourses internal to the production process that also shape the meanings being encoded, including the meanings and ideas that are a crucial part of the producing organization, such as technical knowledge and skills, institutional structures and traditions, assumptions regarding audiences. This context also includes conflicting agendas, the personal beliefs of the staff, as well as various meanings drawn from "other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure" (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 92).

The meanings encoded in a product, such as a news story, can vary widely, from the producer's desire to captivate and retain audiences (potentially by presenting the news story in a manner that makes it more attractive, sensational or entertaining to the audience), to the personal biases held by the journalists preparing the news story, the technical influences of the production team, or to the political interests of the influential figures governing the company, such as the company executives, other investors, or even the government. External influences also contribute to the encoded message. As Hall explains, "though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other

sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part” (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 92).

Codes for Encoding/Decoding

The personal context, or identity, of the individual decoding/encoding a message includes that person’s socio-economic status, cultural background, and numerous other factors which can yield very different interpretations of a message than those intended by the producer of the message. Hall explains that:

Codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry – that is, the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange – depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the ‘personifications’, encoder-producer and decoder-receiver. (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 93)

As a result of divergent codes employed by producers and consumers, the feedback or reaction of the ‘receiver’ may vary greatly from the intended effect of the message. Hall views decoding as “the most significant, but most neglected aspect of the communication process” (Procter 65). Of course, the encoding/decoding model does not suggest that consumers can overthrow the capitalist hegemony; Hall remains very realistic about the scope and lasting impact that struggles over meaning may have:

The spaces 'won' for difference are few and far between, that they are very carefully policed and regulated. I believe they are limited. I know [. . .] that there is always a price of incorporation to be paid when the cutting edge of difference and transgression is blunted into spectacularization. I know what replaces visibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility. (Hall, "What is Black" 468)

Hall identifies three decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional. These three positions vary in how closely their interpretations align with the patterns of hegemonic readings intended by the message producers (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 98).

Dominant-Hegemonic Code

The *dominant/hegemonic* position refers to instances where the consumer (in Hall's case example, the television viewer) decodes a message using the same 'reference code' as the one used in its encoding. Hall agrees that the dominant position, by its very nature, has an advantage over the other positions as "it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order" (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 102). He also admits that, "Codes are *not* equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order" (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 98). However, the hegemonic code "is neither univocal nor uncontested" (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 98).

Negotiated Code

In the negotiated code, or negotiated position, audiences grasp, and to a certain degree accept or appreciate, the encoded meaning while also applying elements of oppositional codes in their interpretation and understanding of what the communicator is attempting to convey. Negotiated codes are a compromise between resistance to (i.e. oppositional decoding), and an acceptance of, the hegemonic code. Hall describes the negotiated position as:

A mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to ‘local conditions’, to its own more *corporate* positions. This negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions, though these are only on certain occasions brought to full visibility. (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 102).

Hall illustrates the negotiated position through an example of a worker’s views on an industrial relations bill that could limit the right to strike and allow wage freezes. The worker (the decoder) may accept, from a national perspective, the economic arguments for wage control and agree that ““we must all pay ourselves less to combat inflation,”” while simultaneously not be willing to give up his or her right to strike for better pay or conditions in their own place of work (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 102). Within this

form of decoding, there are clear and inherent contradictions, as well as multiple negotiated readings, that can exist at one time.

The notion of negotiated code builds on 'negotiated space,' a concept from Hall's earlier work in *Resistance Through Rituals*, a book he co-authored with Tony Jefferson. In this book, Hall explains how youth subcultures decode meanings and 'negotiate space' in a variety of different ways,

The negotiated code is [. . .] one position, but of course, it's not one position at all. [. . .] you will see that what we call the 'negotiated space' is filled out by a number of different positions in relation to subcultures. So the truth is, negotiated readings are probably what most of us do most of the time. [. . .] Most of us are never entirely within the preferred reading or entirely against the whole grain of the text. (Hall, "Reflections" 265)

Negotiated codes offer a form of resistance that is feasible because it negotiates a balance and works *within* the system; thus, they are a form of resistance most readily accessible, and consequently, most frequently employed by the majority of consumers within the context of mass consumer society.

Oppositional Code

Unlike the negotiated position, which may be critical of, or disagree with, dominant codes, but remains at the practical level within the confines of the dominant ideological

system, the oppositional code fully rejects the dominant-hegemonic position along with its apparent 'legitimacy' and preferred readings. Hall explains that "Only when you get to the well-organized, fully self-conscious revolutionary subject will you get a fully oppositional reading" (Hall, "Reflections" 265). It is not the case that receivers in the oppositional position do not understand the dominant meaning; rather, they grasp it fully and choose to reject it. Consequently, their actions also reflect this decoding position. As Hall writes, "it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way" (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 103). Hall's example of the oppositional position describes someone listening to a debate on the need to limit wages and interpreting, or decoding, all mention of 'national interest' as 'class interest' instead, thereby decoding the message to render an entirely different set of arguments (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 103).

As producers of meaning, consumers can exercise agency, engaging in the struggle for power by decoding messages and by producing new negotiated, or even oppositional, meanings. The encoding/decoding model illustrates that, within the production and consumption of popular culture, there remains a margin of uncertainty. Irrespective of the initial producers' efforts to encode and transmit certain dominant meanings with the support of their technical and other resources (i.e. marketing, human resources, networks), the message they disseminate can be processed and understood (decoded) in ways that may, to varying degrees, be significantly at odds with those intended by the producer. In contrast to the Frankfurt School's arguments, therefore, the

encoding/decoding model illustrates that individuals can still question imposed meanings and exercise some agency and resistance.

The encoding/decoding model, however, only illustrates agency as existing at the individual (personal) level in the moment when consumers decode and reproduce meanings. As the following section will demonstrate, the circuit of culture model extends this idea by arguing that the individual decoding of meanings has effects that go well beyond the experience of the individual consumer. That is, such acts are socially and culturally significant.

From Encoding/Decoding to the Circuit of Culture Model

The circuit of culture builds upon Hall's encoding/decoding model. However, unlike the encoding/decoding model, the circuit model examines the feedback mechanisms within the production/consumption loop and accounts for meanings encoded/decoded onto cultural products by individuals after the moment of consumption. The leap from the encoding/decoding model to the circuit of culture model involves the recognition that, through the acts of consumption and (re)production, consumers can exercise agency and influence corporate producers as well as capitalist hegemony itself. This form of agency occurs when the producers react to the meanings generated by consumers and respond by incorporating them into new products.

Hall's circuit of culture relies heavily on the theoretical and practical underpinning outlined in his encoding/decoding work. The circuit model includes five components:

representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation. The illustration below (*Figure 1*) provides Hall's depiction of the interaction between these elements within the circuit of culture:

Figure 1 - Circuit of Culture Model (Diagram)

(Hall, "Representation" 1)

Although identity is not an actual stage in the circuit, Hall's illustration accounts for it because, as he explains, at the base of all communication, lies the act of representation which is both informed by, and shapes, our identity (Hall, *Representation* 1). To Hall, "Meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced." (Hall, *Representation* 24). Thus, in the visual representation of the model, the act of representation is articulated with the concept of identity. Consumption and production have almost the same definitions as in the encoding/decoding model; however the circuit of culture accents the fact that production and consumption are roles that are played by corporate producers as well as consumers. The element of regulation pertains to various

reactions and corresponding efforts to control or limit new cultural products or behaviours. The phase of regulation can involve various players from social interest groups, to corporations and governments, who express concern and offer solutions regarding the perceived cultural impacts of a particular innovation. The phase of regulation implies that the producer of a particular good will respond to these reactions. Surprisingly, in the circuit model, regulation is defined as the response to the social impacts of a product and not as corporations' efforts to regulate how consumers alter that product's meaning.

From the Interpretation of Media to the Interpretation of Things: the Symbolic World of Cultural Commodities

Hall not only understood the encoding/decoding model in relation to the production, circulation and consumption of what we would normally refer to as media texts, but also foresaw the shift to the sign economy. Indeed, when he refers to 'cultural things', Hall is not only referring to the mass media but also to other types of culturally-relevant products such as fashion and electronics (Hall, "Encoding, decoding" 97). Hall often reiterates that the representation of meaning can be transmitted through various types of cultural products, which, by their representative nature, are forms of communication. Unlike the Frankfurt School's definition of the culture industry, this definition of cultural goods is much broader and includes any producer of culturally-relevant products (i.e. products layered with signs and meanings). He explains that codes work by referring, or associating, symbols and signs with "maps of meaning" or "maps of social reality" that

encompass a range of “social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest ‘written in’ to them” (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 98).

This can be seen in one of the most comprehensive texts describing and applying the circuit of culture model, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, co-authored by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda James, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus. In *The Story of the Sony Walkman*, Paul du Gay et al. apply the circuit of culture model in an effort to examine and explain the rise in popularity of the Sony Walkman. Generally speaking, the Sony Walkman story exemplifies the circuit of culture model by showing how the Sony Corporation adapted to a wide range of unanticipated consumer uses for the Sony Walkman. From the intended meanings encoded by the Sony Corporation and its marketing sector, to the meanings created by Walkman consumers, the story illustrates a complete communication and production/consumption circuit. The study also offers a glimpse into how consumers’ articulation of new meanings induced Sony to react and adapt to those meanings by incorporating them into new versions of the Walkman. Thus, the Sony story also illustrates how Sony incorporated (co-opted) the meanings to increase the profitability of the Walkman (du Gay et al. 58-59). As the popularity of the Walkman grew, Sony continued to adjust the design, as well as associated advertising strategies, in order to appeal to a diverse range of consumers. As a result, an even wider range of Walkman models were produced simultaneously to target various types of consumers (du Gay et al. 66). The story of the Sony Walkman also shows how individual understandings and reactions to culturally-relevant products are capable of challenging

the meanings intended by the producers and thus of influencing corporations within the contours of capitalism.

Although not overtly illustrated in Hall's diagram of the circuit model⁷, the incorporation of the meanings created by consumers into culturally-relevant goods (by corporate producers) accounts for the capacity for agency. Co-optation occurs at the (re)production stage, with the representation of consumers' meanings in redesigned, or rebranded, products. The Sony Walkman story thus also illustrates how corporations must remain flexible and adapt their production and marketing approaches to the meanings generated by consumers. As the authors explain:

Despite the enormous efforts made throughout the production process – through the use of design, advertising and marketing processes, for example – to create markets for given products, profits are always dependent upon the ability of the producers to *interpret* the changes in meaning that products undergo throughout their consumption. In this sense, production and consumption are not completely separate spheres of existence but rather are mutually constitutive of one another. (du Gay et al. 103)

In short, the circuit of culture is a “dialogue” between an “ongoing cycle of commodification,” where consumer activities and meanings are (re)produced into revised

⁷ See *Circuit of Culture Model (Diagram)* - Figure 1

versions of products that respond to and commodify consumers' ideas, and "appropriation," where consumers give their own meanings and uses to the products they consume (du Gay et al. 103). More generally, just like the Sony Corporation redesigned and remarketed its Walkman, numerous corporations must continuously respond to new uses and meanings attributed to their product by incorporating those new meanings into their products and marketing campaigns.

Arguably, the incorporation of consumer-generated meanings has resulted in significant positive changes in the production and marketing of various mass produced goods and in the identities of the various corporations that make them. There are numerous examples of the circuit at work in this way: the adoption of the 'cruelty-free' discourse and production methods by cosmetics producers, or the more recent shift that producers have made to manufacturing goods that are, or at least claim to be, 'naturally-based', 'health-conscious', 'energy-efficient' or 'environmentally-responsible.' These changes in production and marketing exemplify how large mainstream manufacturers of cultural products, and other goods, such as foodstuffs or household products (which in the sign economy are all considered to be culturally relevant), incorporate consumers' meanings into mainstream production.

These types of shifts also present an interesting challenge to the circuit of culture's assertion that meanings decoded and encoded by consumers represent agency and resistance through their influence on producers. The process of incorporation (co-optation) could also be defined as an element of regulation. The incorporation of

meanings and discourses into mass production and marketing points to consumers' capacity to question, resist and *influence* the meanings (re)produced and communicated by the culture industry/corporations. However, through the lens of the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture, this assimilation of meanings can also be viewed as the profit-driven exploitation of consumers' ideas (like any other resource). Although this phenomenon could be explained as the market simply responding to consumer demand, the Frankfurt School point us to the notion that corporations manage consumers and co-opt meanings with the intention of reducing oppositional ideas into mere material goods and marketing slogans. By this interpretation, co-optation can also threaten the capacity for resistance in the circuit of culture. If an idea originally decoded using negotiated or oppositional code is co-opted by a corporation, and its meaning is regulated and limited to such an extent that it no longer resists, but rather *supports* the capitalist hegemony, does this not represent the loss of the capacity for agency within the circuit of culture model? Is there a danger that, as Marcuse and Adorno and Horkheimer would likely argue, the co-optation of consumers' negotiated or oppositional meanings by corporations reproduces meanings in such a way as to both reinforce capitalist hegemony and limit their oppositional nature, rendering them inauthentic and ineffective as forms of resistance?

Going Forward

Further application of the circuit of culture model is needed to evaluate the impacts that the processes of co-optation have on meanings, and consequently on agency. Although the *Story of the Sony Walkman* provides a foray into the application and assessment of the

circuit of culture model, the study is more illustrative than analytical in nature. It does not sufficiently examine any of the particular players involved in the circuit, their motivations, or the broader impact of their actions, nor does it provide a detailed analysis of the impact of Sony's co-optation of consumers-generated ideas and meanings.

Just over fifteen years ago, Hall challenged fellow and future academics to maintain the circuit of culture's worth as a scholarly tool. Hall indicated his expectations, saying:

I didn't think of it as generating a model which would last for the next twenty-five years for research. I don't think it has the theoretical rigor, the internal logic and conceptual consistency for that. [. . .] it's a model because of what it suggests, it suggests an approach; it opens up new questions. It maps terrain. But it's a model that has to be worked with and developed. (Hall, "Reflections" 255)

Hall encourages ongoing modification of his model to ensure its continued validity in cultural studies, communications and critical theory (Hall, "Reflections" 272). When asked about what other development and improvements Hall had expected to flow from his model, he indicates that a major volume of work remains to be done in terms of applying and testing the models in practical terms. Hall appears to be daring other scholars to put his models to the test, asking:

How the hell do you actually test this with some folks? Because if you look at the encoding/decoding paper, you will see these hypothetical decoding position

sketched out – I think I created a lot of problems for myself there. They are what I call ideal-typical or hypothetical-deductive positions. They're not empirical positions. They are decoding positions; they are not sociological groups. (Hall, "Reflections" 255-256)

Hall recognizes the need to practically evaluate and further test his theories in the context of cultural groups and the meanings they create.

In the last decade, a limited amount of work has appeared that examines or calls for revisions to the circuit of culture model. However, much of this work continues to apply the circuit model in the analysis of new technologies. The called-for changes predominantly aim to adjust the model to respond specifically to these technological innovations. In their article, "New Media and the Circuit of Cyber-Culture: Conceptualizing Napster," Bryan C. Taylor, Christof Dermont-Heinrich, Kristen J. Broadfoot, Jefferson Dodge and Guowei Jian apply the circuit of culture model to an analysis of a the Napster file sharing software,⁸ which gained widespread use in the late 1990 and early 2000s (Taylor 607). Taylor et al. focus on Napster as a product itself, and how this product, and the behaviour of its producers, was influenced by the actions of its users. Unfortunately the article does not provide an analysis of the agency demonstrated by Napster users who wished to subvert the power structures within the capitalist music industry. Instead, the Napster story follows the transition of a product from a tool for

⁸ Napster – a software system that enabled direct 'peer-to-peer' (personal computer to personal computer) sharing of copyrighted music files without monetary exchange, and thus no profit for the artist or the music industry.

subverting existing power structures to one that ended up as a new marketing vehicle. As the authors explain⁹:

Napster's rapid evolution from a counter-hegemonic technology into an aspiring, investor driven profit-centre confirms Bettig's analysis. After exhausting its willingness to challenge the record industry [. . .] Napster attempted to refashion itself as a legal, fee-based service. [. . .] Napster thus demonstrated the potential for ambivalent technology to be activated in ways that threaten existing institutions, which in turn activate the 'enclosing' structures. (Taylor 623)

The outcome of the Napster story is more indicative of instrumental rationality than of individual agency and resistance to capitalist hegemony. Napster emerged as a product layered with oppositional meanings aimed at resisting the power of the corporate music industry; however, it was co-opted to such an extent that it even helped to inspire an entirely new form of mass marketing and e-commerce.

The regulation and co-optation displayed by the music industry are important to consider vis-à-vis the future of the circuit of culture. Much room remains for the application and development of Hall's work in the analysis of meanings as they pass through the circuit

⁹ Taylor et al. refer to Ronald Bettig's argument that most conflict surrounding new technologies that pose a threat to copyright claims typically follows a predictable pattern: first, the introduction of the new medium or technology that results in temporary loss of copyright owners' control over the circulation; next, the "industrial-productive 'core'" reacts by "appropriating 'peripheral'" firms to control their innovation; and finally, the 'core' engages legal institutions regulate by adjusting copyright laws to maintain the protection of the core institutions' interests (Taylor 623).

and are co-opted by corporations. Stories like that of Napster or the Sony Walkman offer examples of how consumers encode/decode meanings with respect to new technologies; however, they do not answer questions regarding the co-optation of those meanings and its impact on agency and resistance, or popular culture more broadly. As the Napster case illustrates, corporate producers can be forceful, and typically successful, in enclosing the negotiated or oppositional uses of a cultural product to suit their own hegemonic interests. As such, it can also be read as an example of instrumental rationality and the assimilation of new or oppositional meanings in favour of capitalist hegemony. Nevertheless, the Napster story also points to an ongoing struggle between the interests of the culture industry and those of consumers.

In the Story of the Sony Walkman, the first three elements of the circuit of culture model – representation, identity and production – occur within the purview of the culture industry. The next element, consumption, belongs to the realm of the individual consumers. The last step in the cycle, regulation, belongs to the arena of public policy (a narrow interpretation). However, in Taylor et al.'s analysis, the regulation of Napster was not lead by public interest groups or government bodies, but rather by the corporate producers of culture. In Taylor et al. words, the “formal regulation of Napster was dominated by the logic of capital” (Taylor et al. 622).

Recent communication and cultural studies research that applies the circuit of culture model has focused on either media technologies or has been limited to analysing the consumer (audience/recipient) dimensions of the model. To fully assess whether the

circuit of culture model remains a viable theoretical model for arguing for the potential for consumer agency and influence in the ongoing struggle against capitalist hegemony, the elements of regulation (as defined by Taylor et al.) and co-optation must be analysed further. This requires a case study which illustrates the full cycle of the circuit of culture, which will allow for both a deeper analysis of the meanings generated by consumers as well as a closer assessment of how these meanings are incorporated (co-opted) by producers of culturally-relevant goods. The phenomenon of coolhunting offers such a case study. Indeed, it allows for a closer examination of how popular culture producers employ cultural studies to gather information about consumers. It also offers insight into the types of consumer meanings and behaviours that are of greatest interest to these corporations. And finally, it serves as a test case to assess whether the circuit of culture model accurately reflects the degree of agency and influence consumers can exert on the capitalist system.

3 –The Story of Coolhunting: Testing the Circuit of Culture Model

“But how do you know they are the ‘right’ ones – have you been in their closets? Trailed their daily routines? Hung out with them socially? [. . .] Are they core consumers, or the mainstream followers?”

(Lopiano-Misom and De Luca 11)

This chapter provides a detailed overview of coolhunting that includes: an examination of the socio-cultural context which gave rise to this phenomenon; a definition of cool; a description and analysis of the origins and the theoretical and methodological basis of coolhunting; an introduction to key figures in the development of coolhunting; an outline of the major agencies that offer coolhunting services, as well as the types of corporations who use these services; a detailed exploration of coolhunting as ethnographic research; and, finally, a discussion of coolhunting in the context of the circuit of culture model. The discussion introduces how coolhunting impacts the flow of the circuit of culture model by introducing a third actor into the exchange between consumers and producers: coolhunting agents and agencies. The chapter will also offer the basis for determining whether coolhunting represents a threat to human agency and asks whether this practice exemplifies the scientific management and exploitation of meanings which the Frankfurt School argue are characteristic of the instrumental rationality of advanced capitalism. It is important to note here that, although coolhunting can be employed to research a broad range of consumptive practices, its relationship with clothing styles and the fashion industry is strongest and most defined in the literature and is thus of particular interest.

Socio-Economic Context

Long before the advent of branding (Klein) and the sign economy (Lash and Urry), the language of fashion, newness and built-in obsolescence began to spread from the clothing industry to other commercial producers. Orvar Löfgren explains that as early as the 1920s, modern advertising was “attempting to organize demand for the new” and that various producers began to adopt the language of fashion to generate demand for new products (Löfgren 60). He observes that “Although the car industry was one of the first to convert the knowledge from Paris to more mundane fields than *haute couture*, others quickly followed suit. For example, the home appliance industry started to test the idea of an autumn collection” (Löfgren 61). He also notes that, like the boom in the 1920s, the economic surge of the 1990s created the growth of new kinds of occupations, including coolhunters. Löfgren argues that by the 1990s finding newness had become of key importance to various types of producers, and in this context, “Coolhunting was a search technology, aimed at locating and organizing potential energies of newness. It started in the fashion quest for youth-culture trends, but [. . .] was transplanted into new fields of the economy” (Löfgren 62). However, coolhunters were not hired to simply identify new trends; coolhunters gained popularity because they could deliver ideas so new that they had not even become popular yet, and, more importantly, they could detect a subtler quality contained in those ideas – the quality of ‘cool’. But how did finding cool become so important to multi-national corporations?

In identifying the social and economic factors that contributed to the rise of coolhunting, both Gladwell and Klein point to a critical social shift, particularly in the fashion world,

from a top-down conception of fashion to a bottom-up search for the drivers behind clothing trends. Contemporary philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, describes this shift as the 'democratization' of fashion. In his book, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*, Lipovetsky examines how mass consumer society contributed to the rise of more 'democratic' leadership of, and broader access to, fashion. He explains that modern mass production techniques prompted a significant expansion, or opening-up, of fashion consumption:

The democratization of appearance was matched by the extension and eventual generalization of a desire for fashion, a desire previously confined to the privileged strata of society. The hundred years' fashion not only brought divergent ways of dressing closer together, it also turned frivolous ephemera into objects of desire for the masses as it gave tangible form to the democratic right to fashion. Although increasingly broad strata of society had been gaining access to fashion over the centuries, it was only after the two world wars that the 'right' to fashion gained a real foothold and won mass-market legitimacy. (Lipovetsky 63)

As mass produced clothing made fashion increasingly accessible to all consumers, the privilege of being 'in fashion' was no longer reserved for those with higher social and economic status. This shift in fashion politics also changed the criteria for what was considered fashionable. Lipovetsky explains that, "What was deemed ridiculous in the democratic age was not so much the imitation [of aristocratic fashion] as being

out-of-date; that was the new mass ‘taboo’” (Lipovetsky 63). Furthermore, the sheer volume of clothing being produced required employing an increasing number of unknown and anonymous designers; suddenly, the authority to create fashion opened up to a wider range of people who did not represent fashion’s traditional elite, but the working class (Lipovetsky 93). As fashion moved away from the aesthetics of luxury goods and tastes, the role of the high-fashion designer began to decline (Lipovetsky 90).

The shift away from hierarchical “class aesthetics” moved fashion towards a new standard of “youth aesthetic” (Lipovetsky 98). Class status and economic capital were replaced by cultural capital as the defining factor in fashion legitimacy and, by the mid-twentieth century, this cultural capital was held primarily by youth. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, youth-influenced fashion became less concerned with taste and aesthetics and more interested in non-conformism, play, irony, collage, juxtaposition, shock and individualism (Lipovetsky 99-100). By the 1960s, the styles, or “antifashions” (Lipovetsky’s term), worn by youth street cultures, had established their democratic and emancipatory significance as well as their place of influence in the fashion world. Designers began to look to youth subcultures for innovations in clothing styles. Lipovetsky observes that “The first wave of ready-to-wear creators in the 1960s all reflect, within the fashion system, the rise in the new contemporary values featuring rock stars and youthful idols: within a few years , ‘juniors’ had become the prototypes of fashion” (Lipovetsky 100). Similarly, Heath and Potter argue that these changes in fashion were indicative of a broader cultural change where, “At some point, somehow, a

tremendous cultural shift occurred. Bohemian values – that is cool – usurped class as the dominant status system in America” (Heath and Potter 196).

Cool transcends class and encompasses notions of youthfulness and rebellion, including youth subcultures and their resistance to established structures and hierarchies. Naturally, because it acts as a marker of social status, cool is an important concept. Furthermore, because of the growing importance of branding and the layering of meanings onto products, all goods (from shoes to soda pop to dish-soap) have become culturally (aesthetically and reflexively) significant. The creation/production of signs and meanings is no longer limited to the ‘culture industry’ in a traditional sense, but is now involved in the conception, design and distribution of nearly any product, making most mass produced goods culturally relevant. Cool, in its various styles and flavours, is one of those key meanings and images being layered onto such products.

The Birth of Cool

“Cool, it seems, is the make-or-break quality in 1990s branding” (Klein)

In the context of democratized fashion, where youth and street styles now lead fashion, ‘cool’ replaced class, luxury, and artistic hierarchy to become the new measure of fashion. As Gladwell explains:

Once when fashion trends were set by the big fashion couture houses – when cool was trickle-down wasn’t important. But somehow in the past few decades things got turned over, and fashion became trickle-up. It’s now about

chase and flight – designer and retailers and the mass consumer giving chase to the elusive prey of the street cool – and the rise of coolhunting as a profession shows how serious the chase has become. (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”)

Newness and being ‘in the know’ about emerging trends and styles has become of utmost importance. In their book, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter also observe that the “struggle for status is replaced by the quest for cool” (Heath and Potter 322). In the books and articles surveyed in the writing of this thesis, it is clear that most authors avoid providing a hard-and-fast definition of ‘cool’. This is likely because, as Gladwell points out, cool is not only elusive and subjective but also, what *is* cool is constantly changing (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). Nevertheless, there are several elements which are typically associated with the concept. First, Lipovetsky, Gladwell and Klein all allude to youth, as well as youth subcultures (or countercultures, street cultures), when talking about the source for what is cool. Heath and Potter equate ‘cool’ with ‘counterculture’ as well as ‘rebel’, or ‘hip’ consumerism¹⁰ (Heath and Potter 322). According to Heath and Potter, the key characteristic that makes countercultures and hip consumerism cool is their inherent rebellion against the perceived values (such as conformism and hierarchy) held by mass consumer society and the capitalist system. Heath and Potter also highlight the quest for newness and suggest that the ‘rebel chic’ (cool) has long been a driving force behind fashion and the marketing of mass produced cultural goods:

¹⁰ Hip consumerism – the consumption of goods that are cool by their association with countercultural, rebellious, sentiment (Heath and Potter 130).

Ever since the 1960s, hip has been the native tongue of advertising, 'antiestablishment' the vocabulary by which we are taught to cast off our old possessions and buy whatever they decided to offer this year. And over the years the rebel has naturally become the central image of this culture of consumption, symbolizing endless, directionless change, and eternal restlessness with 'the establishment' – or, more correctly, with the stuff 'the establishment' convinced him to buy last year. (Heath and Potter 130)

In short, cool combines being 'in the know' (i.e. of the latest emerging trend) with a sentiment of rebellion and non-conformism. The hip are not simply innovators or early adopters of new styles, but also possess a strong sense of resistance to the 'establishment', that is, youthful, avant-garde nonconformity (Heath and Potter 130, 144). Lumping these sensibilities under an umbrella of 'subculture/counterculture,' Heath and Potter explain that, "unlike traditional status hierarchies, which emphasize continuity across time, cool is structured by a restless quest for nonconformity", adding that "The cool person is the one who has deliberately set himself against the masses of society. He is the rebel, the nonconforming cipher who is the archetypal hero of American movies, music and fiction" (Heath and Potter 191).

Heath and Potter do not mourn the co-optation of subcultures. Instead, they point to Thomas Frank's book, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, in which Frank argues that the corporate co-optation theory

was a myth that emerged in the 1960s. Frank suggests that the co-optation theory represented “faith in the revolutionary potential of ‘authentic’ counterculture combined with the notion that business mimics and mass-produces fake counterculture in order to cash in on a particular demographic and to subvert the great threat that ‘real’ counterculture represents” (Frank 7). As Frank explains:

American business [. . .] imagined the counterculture not as an enemy to be undermined or a threat to consumer culture but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles against the mountains of dead-weight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over the years. [. . .] They welcomed the youth-led cultural revolution not because they were secretly planning to subvert it or even because they believed it would allow them to tap a gigantic youth market (although this was, of course, a factor), but because they perceived in it a comrade in their own struggles to revitalize American business and the consumer order generally. (Frank 9)

In other words, “capitalism had essentially capitulated to the very bohemian values that threatened it” but, “In the process [. . .] it managed to leave capitalism not just intact, but healthier and more dominant than ever before” (Heath and Potter 196-197).

Klein and Gladwell suggest that cool became increasingly important to producers who recognized the need to appeal not just to the reason of consumers, which may be concerned with the effectiveness and quality of a product, but also to their emotions,

which responded to more ephemeral promises related to coolness and lifestyle (Klein 20-21). Gladwell remarks that “Fashion was at the mercy of those kids, whoever they were, and it was a wonderful thing if the kids picked you, but a scary thing too, because it meant that cool was something you could not control. You needed someone to find cool and tell you what it was” (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). Cool thus became an important qualifier in distinguishing and marketing goods and brands (Klein 146). Southgate also points to the ever-increasing significance of brands and their link with the rise of coolhunting, arguing that “In the New Economy bubble of the late 1990s, when the Brand was imbued with an insane and spiralling amalgam of religious, mystical and even messianic properties, the ability to harness cool was a mighty power indeed. In this climate the Coolhunters flourished” (Southgate 167).

Enter the Coolhunters

In the context of democratized fashion, corporations producing symbolically rich goods need a mechanism to collect information on the cool trends emerging from hip youth subcultures. When coolhunters appeared in the 1990s, they presented themselves as having the ability to understand and predict these emerging youth trends. As Löfgren explains, “The product that a coolhunter had to sell was the promise of a potential newness, and a chance to exploit the short but important time-gap before an idea or a commodity turned into fashion. When coolhunters of the 1990s described their skills, they often talked about looking for that which had not yet turned into fashion or might even be defined as anti-fashion” (Löfgren 62). But newness was only part of the project.

Coolhunters also offered a special insight which “everybody seems to want these days, which is a window on the world of the street” (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”).

Gladwell observes that there are ‘three rules of cool’ which define the particular demands and challenges of discovering cool: one, cool “cannot be accurately observed at all because the act of discovering cool causes cool to take flight; two, “cool cannot be manufactured, only observed”; and, three, cool “can only be observed by those who are themselves cool” (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). Janine Lopiano-Misdorn and Joanne De Luca of the Sputnik coolhunting agency summarize this phenomenon stating that, “We just need to look at what is brewing today in the progressive microcultures of the streets – those thinkers and doers who move in individual mind-sets, not the masses. What we consider mainstream – the trends, the fads, the gadgets, the styles, the tastes that become popular – often comes from the visual, sensory, emotional cues of those who are considered ‘the fringe’ or ‘the underground’” (Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca xi). They elaborate by explaining how coolhunters, including their own company, offer the solution for accessing those trends:

To reach them you need an ‘in,’ an entry into their circle. That’s what we do at Sputnik. Armed with a video camera, our nationwide network of young correspondents find those progressive thinkers and doers – young street designers, club promoters, DJs, web developers, filmmakers, electronic musicians – and communicate with them on their level, on their turf. We uncover their beliefs

systems and translate how their thoughts as actions will eventually influence mainstream youth lifestyle. (Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca xi)

Recognizing this reality, multinational corporations such as Adidas, Nike, Levis, Coca Cola, Converse, Tommy Hilfiger, Absolute Vodka, and Miller Brewing, etc, began to employ the services of coolhunters (Klein 72, *L Report*, Southgate 167). As Southgate explains:

Coolhunting gained celebrity as a research technique because it seemed unerringly shrewd at predicting the future [. . .]. Coolhunting offered [. . .] a great and glittering prize. Cool is the anvil on which many brands are made or broken. Cool is the currency all brands profit from when they trade in it. The profits are highest for those brands that play at the high-stake brand tables of sports apparel and fashion. (Southgate 167)

As such, coolhunting became a fixture in the mass production of fashion as well as a wide range of culturally-relevant goods. In the sign economy, coolhunters became “priests of cool. They alone understood cool’s abstruse, obfuscated and opaque rules” (Southgate 167). Klein observes that the economic situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s also prompted large corporations’ need for coolhunting services. She explains that:

At the time that cool-envy hit, many corporations were in the midst of a hiring freeze, recovering from rounds of layoffs, most of which were executed according to the last-hired-first-fired policies of the late-eighties

recession. With far fewer young workers on the payroll and no new ones coming up through the ranks, many corporate executives found themselves in the odd position of barely knowing anyone under thirty years old. In this stunted context, youth itself looked oddly exotic – and information about Xers, Generation Y and twenty-somethings was suddenly a most precious commodity. (Klein 71)

Coolhunting responded to corporations' desire to improve their understanding of the thoughts and behaviours of a particular sub-set of society – young, innovative, and *cool* consumers.

The Methodology of Coolhunting

Although the exact structure and process of coolhunting may differ from one agency to another, Southgate offers a general three-layer model of the coolhunting hierarchy:

- 1) At the bottom sit the Cool. These are the small number of enlightened individuals in the general population who are cool and know cool.
- 2) In the middle are the Coolhunters. These are the Coolhunting agency's foot soldiers. They are on the street, in the club, hanging in the hood, acting as the eyes and ears of their masters.
- 3) At the top are the executives of the Coolhunting agency. They take reports in from the Coolhunters and then follow them up as they see fit. Most also pursue a dogged Coolhunt all of their own. (Southgate 170)

The focus of the coolhunt is not finding objects, but rather people. As Gladwell explains, “The key to coolhunting, then, is to look for cool people first and cool things later, and not the other way around. Since cool things are always changing, you can’t look for them, because the very fact that they are cool means you have no idea what to look for. [. . .] Cool people, on the other hand, are a constant” (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). The specific type of individual that coolhunters search for are the innovators and early adopters as defined by the diffusion model.

Southgate underscores the significance of diffusion as the underlying assumption for coolhunting, “For coolhunters, diffusion theory has the strength and power of a law of nature: universal, all-encompassing, and irresistible” (Southgate 173). In his book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things can Make a Big Difference*, Gladwell explains that, coolhunting follows the premises of the diffusion model. Diffusion theory was developed by sociologists Bruce Ryan and Neal Gross to explain the progression of a new idea or innovation through a population (Gladwell, *Tipping* 196)¹¹. Diffusion research suggests that with any innovation (be it a new technology or a fashion trend), humans adhere to a particular pattern of adoption. Those who are the very first to adopt and begin using,

¹¹ Ryan and Gross conducted a research study offering a clear and concise example of the diffusion model. In the 1930s, Ryan and Gross followed farmers’ uptake of a new hybrid corn seed through a community in Iowa. The study observed that during the first few years of their availability, the hybrid seeds were used by only a few of the 259 farmers studied. Over the next three years respectively, 16, then 21 and then 36 more farmers adopted using the seeds. Suddenly in 1937, 61 new farmers began using the seeds, and over the year that followed near all the remaining farms followed suit. The first few farmers to try the seeds were the Innovators. The slightly larger second wave of farmers who used the seeds were, according to the diffusion model, the Early Adopters. Those who came next were the Early Majority, followed by the Late Majority and finally by the Laggards. (Gladwell, *Tipping* 196-198)

wearing or otherwise employing the new product or trend are the ‘innovators’, “the adventurous ones”, who typically represent a very small portion of the population (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). Next are the ‘Early Adopters’, a slightly larger segment of the population, who Gladwell describes as “the opinion leaders in the community, the respected, thoughtful people who watched and analyzed what those wild Innovators were doing and then followed suit” (Gladwell, *Tipping* 196) . The innovators and the early adopters are the prey of coolhunters. In the fashion realm, these individuals either generate a new idea, or are the first people to adopt a new style; they provide an indication that a particular new trend is about to diffuse through a population of consumers. The early adopters are the “cool brokers”, who “keep tabs on the innovators, evaluate what they are doing and decide whether or not to follow suit” (Heath and Potter 216).

Coolhunters follow the assumptions of the diffusion model, claiming that, after the early adopters accept a certain innovation, that trend will diffuse across a population as it becomes adopted by the early majority, followed by the late majority, and finally, by the laggards. In the capitalist market reality, where the success of symbolically-rich goods is difficult to predict, coolhunting not only helps to discover new styles and ideas, but it also offers certain assurances that a particular trend possesses the potential for up-take across a wide range of consumers. When a coolhunter spots a trend, or rather *someone* starting a trend (i.e. an innovator or early adopter) and communicates this insight to a corporation, this knowledge can then be translated into mass produced goods, which will satisfy mass demand just in time for the trend to ‘tip’ and become adopted by the early

and late majorities. Because coolhunting strives to both uncover new trends and provide a level of certainty regarding a new product or style's future popularity, it reduces the risks associated with the production and marketing of new products and brands.

In contrast to formal diffusion studies, which methodically follow and map out a population, coolhunters quickly and instinctively set out to detect who and what is cool. Coolhunter DeeDee Gordon explains, "The trick is not just to be able to tell who is different but to be able to tell when that difference represents something truly cool. It's a gut thing. You have to somehow just know" (Gladwell, "Coolhunt"). As Gladwell suggests in his three rules of cool, this instinct is intrinsically related to the quality of being cool oneself. Southgate adds that there are not set credentials for coolhunters, "As it is impossible to give rules for what is cool, the usual understanding of recruitment is completely upset. There is, instead, much talk of 'instinct', 'sixth sense', 'gut feelings' and 'people who just know'" (Southgate 171).

The Business of Coolhunting: Key Figures and Organizations

To further understand coolhunting and how it was adopted by multi-national corporations, this section introduces several actors that have played key roles in the development and growth of coolhunting. These key figures include: Baysie Wightman and Dee Dee Gordon, Sharon Lee, Irma Zandl, Janine Lopiano-Misdorn and Joanne De Luca. The discussion also surveys five major coolhunting agencies: Intelligence Group (also referred to as Youth Intelligence Group), Look Look Inc., Lambesis, Sputnik and the Zandl Group.

Baysie Wightman and Dee Dee Gordon

Gladwell begins his “Coolhunt” article by introducing the two personalities most frequently associated with the rise of coolhunting – Baysie Wightman and Dee Dee Gordon. Prior to her introduction to Gladwell, Wightman viewed her job of coolhunting for Reebok as “absolutely no big deal at all. Scouting around to find the urban kids who know what’s on the cutting edge of cool is just part of the process of how you make good products. It’s not that interesting” (Hunt). Timothy Hunt argues that it was Gladwell’s attention to coolhunting that solidified its significance not only for Baysie, but for the “entire coolhunting industry” (Hunt). Gladwell explains that for both Wightman and Gordon, “The hunt for cool is an obsession” (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). One of Wightman’s most significant coolhunting discoveries was the trend which re-popularized the *Converse One Star* sneakers; Wightman had observed that “the cool kids had decided that they didn’t want the hundred-and-twenty-five-dollar basketball sneaker with seventeen different kinds of high-technology materials and colors and air-cushioned heels anymore. They wanted simplicity and authenticity, and [Wightman] picked up on that” (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). Dee Dee Gordon, is credited for coolhunting several major trends, such as the shower sandal. Gordon hunted down this trend in Los Angeles where she noticed white teenage girls adopting this particular clothing style originally worn by Mexican gangsters (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”). Gordon was President and Co-Founder of Look-Look Inc., which she helped establish in 1999 with Sharon Lee (Linkedin Website).

Sharon Lee (Look-Look)

Another key figure in the coolhunting world is Sharon Lee. Lee is currently Co-Owner and Co-President of Look-Look, which she founded with Dee Dee Gordon. Before establishing Look-Look, Gordon and Lee worked together for Lambesis, a research and marketing company, where together they created the “*L Report*,” a highly detailed analysis of ‘cool’ youth trends which companies can purchase to assist them in responding to trends and developing products (Dee Dee, Look-Look Website, *L Report* Website). The Look Look website claims that, in creating and conducting the *L Report*, the Lambesis Research Group “invented a new form of research, as the first study to monitor how trends diffuse from trendsetters to the mainstream market,” and also includes a reference to Gladwell’s work on diffusion of trends within society (*L Report* Website). The description also boasts that, “Today, the L Report is the leading global study on style and prestige trends. L Report identifies the drivers and implications of changing consumer aspirations, empowering brand decision makers to plan for changes in their customers’ attitudes and behavior” (*L Report* Website).

Irma Zandl (Zandl Group)

In 1986, Irma Zandl founded the Zandl Group. This company describes itself as a “research firm specializing in ‘what’s next’ for business” (Zandl Group website). The company produces several bi-monthly trend reports such as *The Young Adult Hot Sheet*, which claims to assist in understanding “the mindset” of the 18-24 age group and alerting companies to “emerging trends” (Zandl Group Website). An annual subscription to the *Hot Sheet* report costs \$18,000 (USD) (Hoover’s Website). In addition to the factsheets,

the company's basic annual report can be purchased for \$10,000; however, clients have the option of upgrading to a "customized" presentation, which includes a video and discussion with Zandl herself¹². Gladwell suggests in his coolhunting article that the *Hot Sheet* is possibly "Dee Dee's [The *L Report*'s] biggest competitor" (Gladwell, "Coolhunt").

Janine Lopiano-Misdom and Joanne De Luca

Janine Lopiano-Misdom and Joanne De Luca also contributed to advancing coolhunting into mainstream corporate use through their coolhunting company, Sputnik. Sputnik produced a biannual trend report, *Mindtrends*, which claimed to track emerging youth movements among "progressive street cultures" and "interpret them into actionable opportunities for marketing, new product development, brand management and advertising" (Lopiano-Misdom, xi). In 1997, Lopiano-Misdon and De Luca published *Street Trends: How Today's Alternative Youth Cultures Are Creating Tomorrow's Mainstream*, a book examining and predicting patterns among youth subcultures. The book is also serves as a marketing plug for coolhunting as it attempts to explain how coolhunting can enhance corporations' understanding of youth trends and why this is important for businesses.

¹²Note: These prices are no longer listed on the website as of October 2011; it is reasonable to assume that the cost has increased; nevertheless, the figures included here offer a general reference point.

The organizations described here are an illustrative sample of coolhunting agencies. There are numerous other market research and analysis companies, not only in the United States and Canada, but across the globe. However, many of these agencies offer only vague, and often inflated, descriptions of their work on public websites. For this reason, the organizations selected as examples of coolhunting in this thesis have been identified as coolhunters by key authors or scholars and clearly demonstrate their use of coolhunting techniques as described by Gladwell. *Table 1* provides a summary of these five key coolhunting agencies and the current status for each.

Table 1 - Summary of Five Key Coolhunting Agencies

Agency	Established	Major Report	Cost of Products	Examples of High-Profile	Description of Activities and Current Status (as of Fall 2011)
Intelligence Group (Also referred to as Youth Intelligence Group)	No date available. Company website indicates that it has been producing its <i>Cassandra Report</i> for the last 15 years; presumably, the company has existed for at least that long.	<i>The Cassandra Report</i> (quarterly) Described as a tool for marketers “seeking to gain strategic insights from the behaviors and lifestyles of young consumers”	Information not available	Adidas, Nordstrom, Cosmopolitan, Microsoft, L'Oréal, Walt Disney, Honda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying emerging movements in popular culture and then translating them into relevant information for companies, brands, and other institutions. Marketing research and consulting. Identifying, tracking and forecasting behaviour of consumers (ages 14 to 39, including: new parents and specific sub-demographics of youth (e.g. college students, urban youth).
Look Look Inc.	1994 (Co-founders: Sharon Lee and Dee Dee Gordon)	<i>Look-Look Magazine</i>	Information not available	Calvin Klein, Audi, Microsoft, Universal Pictures, Nike, and Virgin Mobile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No longer active. According to Gordon's <i>Linkedin</i> profile, Look-Look has now morphed into her side-project, the <i>Gordon Unlimited Collaboratory</i> (2009) a by-invitation-only web-based network of “brand enthusiasts” focusing on innovation in technology, social media, and design. Gordon is now President of Innovation with Sterling Brands marketing agency.
Lambesis	1987 (Founder: Nicholas Lambesis)	<i>L Style Report</i>	Information not available	Airwalk Footwear, Guess Clothing, <i>bebe</i> (clothing), Levi Strauss and Co., SKYY Vodka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research of market, consumer and brand dynamics. Cultural trend reporting via global network (via Urban Pioneers). Branding and advertising.

Sputnik (Sputnik Entertainment)	Pre-1997, but no exact date available. (Co-Founders: Janine Lopiano-Misdorn and Joanne DeLuca)	<i>Mindtrends</i> Report	Information not available	Reebok International, Levi-Strauss, Shiseido, PepsiCo.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No longer active. (Company website largely deactivated). In 2003, the founders of the former Sputnik established a new not-for-profit project, <i>The Sputnik Observatory of Contemporary Culture</i>. The Observatory claims itself to be an educational organization dedicated to the study of contemporary culture.
Zandl Group	1986 (Founder: Irma Zandl)	<i>The Hot Sheet</i> (bimonthly trend report)	\$18,000 per subscription to the Hot Sheet (based on pre 2010 information)	Nike, Old Navy, Sony, Disney, Estee Lauder Inc., Calvin Klein Cosmetics, Coca-Cola, Cartoon Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trend analysis, market research, and marketing consulting services to help companies understand and “capitalize” on market trends. Aim to connect “uncool corporate America and the hip demographics” (i.e. young adults, teens, and tweens).

(Sources: The Information in this chart was collected from various sources including: Google Finance, Hoover’s Database, official corporate websites, Wikipedia, and the *LinkedIn* sites of the various corporate founders – see *Table 1* notes in Bibliography for full source references.)

Coolhunting as Ethnographic Research?

When describing themselves, coolhunting agencies refer to their work as ‘ethnography studies’¹³. As the Frontline documentary explains, coolhunters study youth “carefully as an anthropologist would an exotic native culture” (“Merchants”). The Zandl Group website claims that “Over the last 20 years we have pioneered the use of many non-traditional and ethnographic research approaches that yield rich consumer insights while also providing clients with first-hand exposure to their consumers’ world” (Zandl Group). Similarly, the Youth Intelligence Group describes their work as “identifying emerging movements in popular culture and then translating that information into relevant knowledge for companies, brands, and institutions. [. . .] We immerse ourselves in their lives, their environments, their concerns, and their desires” (Youth Intelligence Group). Likewise, Sputnik’s approach to coolhunting also follows the methodology of ethnographic study, by getting close to subcultures to “understand what they are doing culturally and socially by tracking the shifts, where they are going or what they will be doing next,” adding that, “we go to the streets, the neighborhoods, the clubs, the basements and the playgrounds, and talk to the street cultures. On their level, their turf [. . .]” (Lopiano-Misdom and De Luca 8, 10) Much like academic ethnographers, coolhunters work in the field to find and observe cool people and new trends. They travel to major cities, such as New York or Los Angeles¹⁴ and typically do their research in what are

¹³ A fulsome discussion of ethnography will be offered in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

¹⁴ Although one can assume that there are coolhunting companies in Europe, the available literature provides no information on coolhunting in the European context; however, some American agencies, such as Look-Look, report conducting coolhunting research in Europe and Asia.

considered to be the stylish and trendy neighbourhoods and establishments (such as shops, clubs and cafes). Coolhunters attend concerts and other events where cool youth can be spotted, and they also visit high schools and university and college campuses.

Coolhunters observe people who are out on the street or in public places, but they may also approach interesting individuals to document their 'look' or comments in photos or video. Depending on the agency they work for, coolhunters may strike up casual conversation with individuals, or may ask them to fill out questionnaires.

In the early 1990s, when Wightman was a coolhunter for Converse, she personally went out to search for the innovators of cool trends. However, as Southgate explains, in today's coolhunting world, most agencies have networks of youth informants, or 'correspondents' (Grossman, "Merchants"). Most of these in-field coolhunters are youths themselves, ranging from teens through to individuals in their early thirties, including high school or university students and young professionals (Klein 72, Albom).

Correspondents are the layer of coolhunters working in the field and reporting their findings to their agencies using formats such as blogs, websites, photos and video submissions ("Merchants"). Many of these correspondents who do field research for coolhunting agencies are not paid staff, but are compensated for their work in product samples and other free goods (Grossman). It may not be feasible for coolhunting firms to pay these individuals in any significant way because of their sheer number – for the major coolhunting companies the numbers correspondents often average in the thousands. The Lambesis Research Group refers to their correspondents as a "network of Urban Pioneers," claiming that their data is gathered from this "exclusive" network (L

Report Website). In addition to their correspondents, Lambesis also employs “style and prestige experts in cities across the globe” as well as an “online panel of style and prestige influencers” (*L Report Website*). Similarly to Lambesis, the Intelligence Group, which operates out of New York and Los Angeles, boasts a network of approximately 15,000 correspondents, who include not only coolhunters but also a number of what they categorize as ‘mainstream consumers’ ¹⁵(*Intelligence Group Website*). Likewise, Gordon reports that her coolhunting agency, Look-Look, had approximately 10,000 ‘respondents’ under its research umbrella, 500 of which were fully trained correspondents based not only in North America but also in Japan and across Europe (“Merchants”). As Gordon explains, Look-Look’s global correspondents are trained to “Find a certain type of kid, a kid that we call a ‘trendsetter’ or an ‘early adopter’”. This is a kid who looks outside their own backyard for inspiration, who is a leader within their own group. These kids are really difficult to find. So this correspondent goes out and finds and identifies these chart-setting kids. They interview them. They get them interested in what we do. They hire

¹⁵ The Intelligence Group offers some interesting definitions of the three types of correspondents working for them (trendsetters, industry insiders and mainstream consumers). These are included below as they appear on the company’s website:

Trendsetters comprise approximately 15% of the youth population and lead the pack in their behavior, attitudes and experimentation with new brands, products and experiences. We handpick trendsetters based on their progressive outlooks and actions, as well as the influence they have on their peers. Our trendsetter network provides us with a continuous dialogue on the products, activities and ideas that shape the world.

Industry Insiders include artists, editors, DJs, designers, entrepreneurs and other Gen X and Gen Y influencers who are on the pulse of emerging trends in their respective industries. This network of insiders keeps us ahead of the curve on new ideas in influential fields.

Mainstream Consumers are equally important to brands, since they represent the majority of the population and serve as a benchmark to confirm and contextualize the trends we identify. Our online panel of mainstream consumers is capable of quickly providing statistically significant feedback on pressing issues. These correspondents are continually monitored to ensure they’re representative of the national population. (*Intelligence Group website*)

them to do work for us” (“Merchants”). Coolhunting agencies are constantly recruiting new correspondents; not only do many of their websites include a section for correspondents to submit applications, but existing correspondents are also encouraged to recruit the cool people they find.

Reporting to Clients

Once collected, coolhunted information (photos, stories, videos, etc) is submitted to the coolhunting agency for review and synthesis by company experts and executives. The agency then publishes various types of reports summarizing the findings. These reports are published at regular intervals or at the request of clients. Marketers, media companies and other manufacturers can purchase a subscription to access these reports. The cost of the subscriptions average around twenty-thousand dollars annually (“Merchants”). One example of such a report is the earlier-mentioned *L Report*, produced by the Lambesis agency, which costs approximately twenty-thousand dollars annually (the *L Report*). Released four times a year, in six different versions (one for New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Austin-Dallas, Seattle and Chicago) the *L Report* is based on coolhunting involving “go[ing] to each city and find[ing] the coolest bars and clubs and ask[ing] the coolest kids” to collect data (Gladwell, “Coolhunt”).

Coolhunters and the Circuit of Culture

As earlier established, agency exists within the circuit of culture at two stages: one, at the moment of consumption, where individuals engage in an active process of decoding/encoding the meanings of products which they purchase and use; and two,

when the culture industry receives and responds to these meanings generated by consumers, and is influenced by them in such a way as to (re)code and (re)produce those meanings in the new products that they make. The fact that corporations need coolhunting services affirms several aspects of Hall's circuit of culture model by illustrating how capitalist producers cannot fully control or dictate the meanings of culturally-relevant products and thus need indicators of what types of products and meanings consumers are likely to accept. But, coolhunting also illustrates how these producers incorporate and co-opt meanings that are encoded/decoded by consumers. Coolhunters play a significant role in the transmission of meanings from consumers to producers. When visually mapped in the circuit of culture model, coolhunting appears directly after the moment of consumption as illustrated in the image below (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2 - Modified Circuit of Culture Model Diagram Illustrating the Role of Coolhunters

There still remains the question of whether coolhunters' involvement supports, destroys or is neutral with respect to the potential for agency in the circuit of culture model. It could be argued that coolhunting is simply an extension of corporate producers' capacity

to encode/decode consumers' meanings, within the cycle of production-consumption. Gladwell's three rules of cool shed some insight on the significance of coolhunting to the circuit of culture model, which can be interpreted as follows: one, once 'cool' is decoded/encoded by coolhunters and the corporations they work for, it no longer possesses the same meanings (and thus quality of coolness) as did the original decoding/encoding; two, because of the elusiveness of cool, corporations are not the source of coolness of a particular culturally-relevant product, but rather cool is produced by cool consumers; three, in order to be able to know cool, coolhunters must be cool themselves. Coolhunters hold a privileged relationship with the subjects they study. Coolhunters act as both consumers and (re)producers of meanings. Neither members of the 'uncool' corporate manufacturers, nor the innovators of new meanings, coolhunters occupy a privileged place within the circuit of culture model.

By definition of their function, coolhunters are agents of the corporate culture industry and they represent an additional filter for consumers' meanings within the circuit of culture. The position of coolhunters allows them to decode/encode meanings as they circulate along the circuit, indicating a need to account for the specific impact of coolhunting on the overall functioning of the circuit of culture. Even more importantly, the potential impact that coolhunters can affect on the authenticity of meanings, and correspondingly the capacity for consumer agency within the circuit of culture, must also be further assessed. The next chapter will conduct a formal assessment of the practice of coolhunting to evaluate its impact not only on the function of the circuit of culture, but

more broadly on the potential for agency and resistance in the context of mass consumer society.

4 –Critical Assessment of Coolhunting

This chapter presents a critical assessment of coolhunting and its effect on the capacity for agency within the consumption of mass produced goods. As discussed in previous chapters, the circuit of culture model asserts that the opportunity for agency exists in two key areas: one, during the consumption phase, where individual consumers actively decode and encode meanings onto the products they consume; and, two, when consumer-generated meanings influence corporations in the later (re)production phase of the circuit. The second form of influence occurs when a producer is compelled to incorporate, and in some way reproduce in its products, the meanings generated by consumers. As indicated in the previous chapter, often the sign-value of a product, such as cool, is originally created by individual consumers. The source of the sign-value of cool is not the commercial producer, which therefore necessitates the co-optation of cool by corporations from youth subcultures. Within the circuit of culture, Hall sees the industry's co-optation of meanings as an avenue for consumer influence on the system, and thus an opportunity for agency and resistance to capitalist hegemony. However, as the Frankfurt School would argue, under the capitalist logic of instrumental rationality, co-opted meanings are not merely exploited for profit, but their assimilation into capitalist production robs them of their oppositional capacity.

When coolhunting comes into play within the circuit of culture, it delivers meanings created by subcultures directly to corporations. It could be argued that coolhunting simply facilitates the transmission of meanings from consumers to capitalist producers. If so, coolhunters would represent just another step in the circuit of culture (as illustrated in

the previous chapter). Yet, it is also possible that coolhunting interferes with and limits the capacity for agency and resistance. As previously established, coolhunting modifies how information (meaning) flows through the circuit. This interference can have a negative effect on the depth, authenticity and broader social influence of those meanings as they move through the circuit. Coolhunting can also be seen as a technique that intercepts meanings before they fully develop and diffuse throughout society. This interception of meanings interferes not only with the workings of the circuit of culture, but can also have an impact on the degree of influence which those meanings might have on society more broadly. To help assess the potential impact of coolhunting on meanings and culture, this chapter assesses coolhunting practices against established methodological and ethical standards for ethnographic research, before delving into a broader critique of the practice and its impacts on meanings, the circuit of culture and agency. The analysis will conclude by determining whether coolhunting nurtures, destroys or has no impact at all on subcultures and their capacity to exercise agency within the context of the consumption of mass culture.

Assessing Coolhunting Against Accepted Ethnographic Research Principles

As described in the previous chapter, coolhunters claim to conduct ethnographic studies of street cultures. Ethnographic research, in turn, originated within the field of anthropology, but with a history tainted by its use by colonial powers as a tool for the control and exploitation of the cultures studied. Southgate suggests that this connection is indicative of the impact that coolhunters have on their subjects. He explains, “Anthropology has for decades struggled with the ugly truth that much anthropological

study was done to help colonial powers understand how to contain troublesome indigenous populations. Naturally, it does not surprise the critics to find the agent provocateurs of Cultural Imperialism looking to Colonial Imperialism for role models” (Southgate 178). As this chapter will show, coolhunting not only falls short when tested against ethical and methodological norms established by ethnographic researchers, but that it also plays an active role in co-opting and reducing the oppositional meanings of subcultures in such a way as to reinforce capitalist hegemony.

As the discipline of ethnography has evolved, academic ethnographers have established standards to guide their research and increase ethnography’s authority as a form of human inquiry. In their book, *Doing Ethnographies*, Mike Crang and Ian Cook describe ethnographic study as observation that may include interviews, focus groups, note taking, as well as photography or video documentation of the subject, for the purpose of “understanding parts of the world more or less as they are experienced and understood in the everyday lives of the people who ‘live them out’” (Crang and Cook 1). The key aspect of ethnography, as it is defined today, is gathering knowledge about a culture *without* the goals of managing, altering or subverting its subject – a set of goals that are directly meant to mark a clear break with the exploitative manner in which it has been employed in the colonial past. The tools, practices, and behaviours of ethnographic researchers are monitored and reviewed by peers in the academic community, as well as formalized ethics boards. Ethnographic research is not only held up to rigorous ethical standards but is also motivated by a desire to better understand particular cultures, and to potentially (but cautiously and respectfully) contribute to improving their lived

conditions. In contrast, coolhunting is motivated by the criteria of efficiency, management and profit. In an interview included on the PBS *Frontline* documentary on coolhunting, Mark Crispin Miller argues that:

When corporate revenues depend on being ahead of the curve, you have to listen. You have to know exactly what they [youth] want and exactly what they're thinking, so that you can give them what you want them to have. Now that's an important distinction. The MTV machine doesn't listen to the young so that it can make the young happier. It doesn't listen to the young so it can come up with startling new kinds of music, for example. The MTV machine tunes in so it can figure out how to pitch what Viacom has to sell to those kids. And this speaks to the inexorable narrowing of the range of content, despite the fact that so many champions of the status quo keep talking about all the choices that we all now enjoy. ("Merchants")

Crispin refers to MTV as a key example of corporations that rely heavily on coolhunting, as well as other ethnographic studies of youth, to inform their programming development in order to maximize sales and profits. Similarly, in his discussion with *Frontline*, Robert McChesney makes the following observations regarding the motivations behind coolhunting and similar research:

The purpose of the focus group is never to find out what teens want per se. It's to find out what teens want so they can make the most money off it as possible.

What they're looking for is simply within the range of what they can make the most money off of. It's not a legitimate search for anything that teens might possibly want. It's not an open-ended hunt. If they were to find out that most teens aren't interested in something, but still this company can make money off selling it to them, they're still going to sell it to them. It's a self-serving argument to say that this research is done to basically serve teens. It's done to better manipulate teens. ("Merchants")

The Frontline documentary also includes an interview with Brian Graden, President of MTV programming at the time. The conversation with Graden, in which he ties all of MTV's efforts to understand youth to the commercial success of the corporation, is illustrative of the marketing and profit-oriented motivations behind coolhunting. Based on coolhunters' own descriptions of their work, the language of ethics and research integrity is absent from their vocabulary; instead the language of sales, ratings, profits, and co-optation permeates their definition of successful research. When asked what a coolhunter is really trying to understand, Gladwell admits, "I don't know that they're trying to understand a person," adding that "But in cool hunting, there is an idea that it is possible to put a finger on the evolution of taste without . . . having to understand important questions about what they like at this moment" ("Merchants").

This discussion will show how, relative to these standards of ethnographic research, coolhunting's goal is to collect a quick, superficial sketch of a culture in order to reproduce it for the market as quickly as possible.

Disclosure, Consent and Privacy

Crang and Cook indicate that ethnographic research “is always bound up in issues of power/knowledge and is therefore, inherently political” (Crang and Cook 26).

Intrinsically, the researcher wields power over the subject and, for this reason, they argue it is crucial that researchers both adequately inform their subjects about the study, and acquire their informed consent. Similarly, in “The Ethics of Social Research,” Martin Bulmer describes informed consent as the “Linchpin of ethical behaviour in research,” and an essential requirement for balancing power between researcher and subject (Bulmer 49). Bulmer specifies that informed consent must include the following elements: participants must be free to choose to participate without the intervention of “force, fraud, deceit, duress, overreaching or any other ulterior form of constraint”; subjects must be legally capable of giving consent; participants must be fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research; all involved are made aware of potential risks; and finally, subjects must be informed of the arrangements around confidentiality of data (Bulmer 49). Similarly, in *Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson argue that informed consent is one of the five key ethical considerations for ethnographic research. They note that “It is often argued that people must consent to being researched in an unconstrained way, making their decision on the basis of comprehensive and accurate information about it; and that they should be free to withdraw at any time” (Hammersley and Atkinson 210).

Coolhunting clearly involves an uneven power balance between the coolhunter (an agent of the corporate producers) and the cool individual, whose subculture potentially

represents a form of resistance, as well as a reservoir of creative resources for commercial interests. The *Frontline* documentary shows footage of a typical coolhunt, which illustrates a lack of respect for the principle of informed consent. In this example, even when coolhunters appear to ask for consent, they provide their subjects with only partial information and do not fully communicate the intent of their research. In the footage, a Look-Look coolhunter is shown observing youth attending a rock concert. She approaches some young boys, asking them if she may take their photo for a “street culture website I work for.” She omits the details that she actually works for the Look-Look agency, or that the images collected may be used in the agency’s *Look-Look Magazine*, which is sold for profit to other corporations. The description she offers to the subject makes no effort to ensure that they are well-informed of why they are being studied or what will become of the collected data. It is also worth noting that, in the sample coolhunt shown by *Frontline*, the coolhunter does not take care to verify if her subjects are of legal age to give consent. This is particularly problematic since the subjects of coolhunting are youth, who in many cases may not be of legal age to consent to participate as subjects in ethnographic research.

Hammersley and Atkinson also point out that the covert observation of participants (i.e. observation without proper consent), even in an academic context, is always a violation of human autonomy and dignity that is very rarely justifiable and “is analogous to infiltration by *agents provocateurs* or spies” (210). Similarly, Bulmer states that, by definition, “Covert participant observation is clearly a violation of the principle of informed consent” (Bulmer 55). Consistent with Bulmer’s as well as Hammersley and

Atkinson's arguments, Douglas Rushkoff, in his commentary on the Look-look coolhunt, refers to coolhunters as "culture spies who penetrate the regions of the teen landscape where corporations aren't welcome" ("Merchants"). Although covert ethnographic study may, in some specific cases, be justified in order to solicit participants' reactions and views (which they may not otherwise share honestly), from an ethical perspective, conducting such ethnographic research strictly for purposes of commercial profit can by no means be accepted as a legitimate or excusable justification of such actions. Bulmer argues that only in "certain highly exceptional circumstances, [can] deception [. . .] be justified by the context in which the research is carried out" (Bulmer 56). He explains that only in rare cases may covert research be considered if the benefits of the knowledge it produces (which could only be collected in a covert manner) can outweigh the risks of conducting the covert research. Even if covert research is deemed permissible and efforts are made to mitigate the risks, such as protecting the confidentiality of the findings in order to prevent harm to the participants, Bulmer remains uncertain about the practice and asks, "Apart from the problem of being unable to predict the consequences of publishing research, the central issue in any risk/benefit equation such as this is: who is to draw up the balance sheet and determine whether particular methods are justified or not?; whose causes are the right causes in social research?" (Bulmer 56). Although Bulmer poses this question rhetorically, clearly the decision should not be left to those who stand to profit from undertaking the research, as is the case in coolhunting.

Similarly, in his article entitled, “Ethnography”, Nigel Fielding examines the ethical implications of deception and covert observation. He indicates that the use of these techniques requires careful justification and is only acceptable when studying groups which would otherwise be hostile to research such as powerful elites or violent or racist organizations. He stresses that “a covert approach is almost always inappropriate in anthropology, where the deceptive role is frowned upon and may represent a breach of professional ethical codes” (Fielding 149). Fielding also points to the phenomenon of ‘gatekeepers,’ who are the researcher’s contacts (informants). He argues that, in some cases, gatekeepers can be made aware of the researcher’s interests and intentions and may give consent on behalf of their group, but neglect to properly inform and gain consent from the others subjects. Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca explain that coolhunting involves such covert observation of subjects in both public, as well as private, places, where informants not only observe but may also engage in conversation with the subjects. Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca’s description of the work of Sputnik’s informants suggests a certain undisclosed (and therefore deceitful) infiltration of cool subcultures. Comparing coolhunting with focus groups (“the old way of gathering information”), Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca boast about how gathering information in a covert manner yields much richer results:

How insightful can a focus group be when everyone in the room know they are being paid to answer questions for a corporation? It’s human nature to impress, to sometimes pretend or exaggerate your true self to gain acceptance, especially in a group situation where you feel you are being judged [. . .] What’s lacking is

reality, the consumer or consumers in their natural environment, relaxed, possibly with their friends, with the interviewer they are having a conversation with – not answering questions or ranking their attitudes on a scale. (Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca 11)

Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca indicate that their correspondents use informal conversation and exploit their own personal relationships with innovators and trendsetters for their research. They explain, “But who deems someone a ‘trendsetter’? Their peers do, and it’s their peers who are the Sputnik correspondents. They are friends of friends; have the same interests, frequent the same places, shop the same stores. The power of finding the trendsetters is to be ‘in’ with them” (Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca 12). She further adds, “Sputnik gets in through our correspondents who have intimate conversations with progressive individuals and uncover on videotape insights that are deeper [. . .] What happens here is magic – the casual, comfortable and honest conversations that reveal a lot” (Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca 12-14). Lee describes the Look-Look correspondents similarly as embedded in the culture they report: “They’re living in the culture, as opposed to being outside the culture” (“Merchants”). These descriptions suggest that coolhunting informants represent the type of gatekeepers which Fielding cautions about. The Sputnik and Look-Look informants offer an invalid form of consent because they do not properly consult with, or inform, their subjects of what they are doing. In addition to failing to attain fully-informed consent, the scenarios above show that informants abuse the confidences of personal relationships and the cultures they are privy to, for both personal gain as coolhunting informants, and for the benefit of

the agencies they work for. These shortcomings violate the rules of informed consent and the associated principles of disclosure and respect for privacy.

Overall, the language of research ethics in terms of consent, transparency, and privacy is absent in coolhunting. In their descriptions of coolhunting methodology, neither Gordon or Lee, nor Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca, refer to respect for consent, privacy, transparency, or any form of ethical scrutiny of their methodology. Indeed, there is a clear lack of mention of any rigorous ethical oversight to guide how informants should interact with subjects to gather information. As mentioned above, in academic research, deception or misinformation of research subjects may be justified in very rare circumstances and only after thorough examination and deliberation by experts in the field and by their respective ethics boards. Conversely, in coolhunting, the decision is left to the young coolhunter informant whose motivation is to gather the most information on emerging new trends in order to profit from this research. In describing the guidance which her company provides to its informants, Lee admits that, "We actually don't direct them. The great thing about why we call them correspondents is that, in the traditional sense of correspondent, they have a digital camera around their neck, they have a laptop with them, and they're living in the culture, as opposed to being outside the culture" (*"Merchants"*). As illustrated by the above examples and suggested by its critics, the onus of the coolhunting 'researcher' is not on respect for the integrity of the culture being studied but instead on infiltrating and acquiring information by any means, without concern for the principle of informed consent or privacy.

Making the Private Public – Long Term Impacts

Hammersley and Atkinson remind us that the implications of the subjects' right to privacy in the context of ethnographic research reach beyond the scope of the research project. They indicate how all social research potentially "Entails the possibility of destroying the privacy and autonomy of the individual, of providing more ammunition to those already in power, of laying the groundwork for an invincibly oppressive state" (Hammersley and Atkinson 212). With this in mind, they stress that a researcher's violation of a subject's privacy and trust is not only "breaching a matter of principle", but that "making the private public may have undesirable long-term consequences" (Hammersley and Atkinson 212). Subjects possess rights with respect to their privacy during the research process, including the right to limiting of the publication of the personal/private information that may be collected, as well as the right to exercise some degree of control over what this information is used for. Hammersley and Atkinson explain that, "closely related to the issue of privacy is the idea advanced by some researchers that people have a right to control information relating to them, and that they must give their permission for particular uses of it by researchers" (Hammersley and Atkinson 211).

On the one end of this spectrum, the private can be viewed as the personal information that subjects reveal about their feelings, personal experiences, thoughts, and relationships; on the other end, a certain level of privacy, intimacy and trust is implied within a particular culture, space, group or setting. As discussed in the preceding section, coolhunting violates individual privacy through its breach of principles of informed

consent; however, the broader negative impacts of coolhunting pertain to the manner in which it makes the private public. Though they can be observed in public places, the subcultural styles that coolhunters study represent the private thoughts, behaviours and meanings that embody the identity of that group. Hebdige and Hall both underscore the significance that subcultural styles represent for their members. They argue that the objects incorporated into subcultural styles are “either intrinsically or in their adapted forms, homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self-image of the subcultures. They [are] the objects in which (the subcultural members) could see their central values held and reflected” (Hebdige 114). Ethnographic research collects this type of information, but simply studying these groups does not constitute a violation of their privacy if data is gathered, interpreted and used ethically. Coolhunting, however, violates privacy by infiltrating and gathering information pertaining to subcultures without proper consent, and by selling this information for profit. In doing so, coolhunting transforms the private meanings and identities of subcultures into public commodities. By facilitating the mass reproduction and premature diffusion of subcultural styles, coolhunting contributes to both the corporate exploitation of these cultures and risks precipitating their demise. Even coolhunter Dee Dee Gordon admits, “The process of discovering cool kills cool, because that early cool person is scared of one thing, and that is of seeming like everybody else. So the faster everyone else adopts the idea, the faster the cool person has to run in the opposite direction” (“Merchants”). Hebdige explains this process of commercial assimilation of subcultures; his description illuminates how coolhunters can accelerate and amplify the demise of a subculture:

Thus, as soon as the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’. Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise. In this way, the two forms of incorporations (the semantic/ideological and the ‘real’/commercial) can be said to converge on the commodity form. (Hebdige 96)

Coolhunting illustrates the potential damage that Hammersley and Atkinson warn can result from poorly administered ethnographic research – damage that not only violates privacy, but also strengthens the oppressive capacity of those already in a position of power, and ultimately harms the culture that it studies. As Klein observes, “If there was a lost indigenous tribe of cool a few years back, rest assured that it no longer exists” (Klein 80).

Documentation and Representation of Findings

Crang and Cook stress that accurate and verifiable research findings are a key component of ethical ethnographic research and requires the following elements:

- *credibility of the account* (i.e. authenticated representation of what actually occurred),
- *transferability of the material* (i.e. making what occurred intelligible to the audience),

- *dependability of the interpretation* (i.e that it is not illogical, or how partisan it is) and
- *confirmability of the study* (i.e. the ability to audit the process that made it through personal reflection, audit processes or opportunities for informants to reply). (Crang and Cook 146)

Crang and Cook recognize that ethnographic studies cannot be assessed or replicated with the same rigour and precision as laboratory science, but they maintain that certain steps at both the information gathering and analysis stages of the project can help to ensure research accuracy. They suggest that researchers themselves should be conscious of, and maintain detailed notes on, their assumptions and thought processes to allow their peers and superiors to review research approaches and findings (Crang and Cook 146-147). Crang and Cook also suggest that researchers share and validate their formalized research findings and conclusions with those studied (Crang and Cook 148). Fielding echoes this recommendation, stating that “Unless there is a danger of reprisals affecting the physical security of the ethnographer, subjects should be given the right to comment on findings” (Fielding 161).

Assessing the findings of coolhunting against Crang and Cook’s criteria is a challenging task. First, the findings of coolhunting are available only to internal players or to the corporations that purchase their reports. Coolhunters also do not reveal details of their research process to protect themselves from competing agencies. Furthermore, because coolhunters research street subcultures and cool (which is constantly in flight, it is

difficult for later researchers to return to the same groups of people to verify or replicate findings. Furthermore, coolhunting informants are not trained researchers; thus, their diligence in methodology and note-taking, as well as their ability to be self-reflexive, are, at best, questionable.

Unlike academic ethnographic study, coolhunting does not aim to attain a deep and thorough understanding of its subjects. One needs only to recall Lee's comments in her *Frontline* interview regarding the 500 informants working for her Look-Look agency: Lee explains that her informants are trained solely "to be able to find a certain type of kid, a kid that we call a 'trendsetter' or an 'early adopter'" and admits that beyond this "we don't direct them" ("Merchants"). This, and previously discussed descriptions suggest that the goal of coolhunting is to piece together a superficial sketch, a snapshot, of a subculture and its style in order to report these findings to corporations as quickly as possible. The input arrives piecemeal from hundreds of loosely trained informants; one can extrapolate that this type of undirected observation is only detailed enough to convey the general elements of a subculture – a few pictures, generic questionnaires and videos gathered by youth themselves. Furthermore, with so many youth correspondents working in locations spread out across the country (or around the world for agencies such as Look-Look) with little or no supervision, it is unlikely that coolhunting agencies afford the time or resources required to follow-up with these informants to assess their methodology or validate findings. Neither do Lee and Gordon, nor Lopiano-Misdorn and De Luca, make any reference to mechanisms for methodological review or ethical monitoring of coolhunting. In fact, coolhunters' descriptions of their research practices

include no mention of steps to ensure sound data collection or efforts to mitigate for biases and assumptions, nor do they suggest that at any point that they return to their correspondents or subjects to validate their interpretations of data and findings. In all the documentation on the process of coolhunting reviewed for this thesis, there was no mention of ethical or methodological dilemmas, or any discussion of opportunities for subjects or peers to review and validate findings. Of course, coolhunters would argue that the quality of their research is tested via the commercial success of a trend they identify. However, this type of test is an inaccurate measure of the methodological or ethical soundness of coolhunting, because meanings co-opted from subcultures could still be met with commercial success, even if their portrayal is inaccurate.

Issues of Exploitation/Harm and Consequences for Further Research

In their discussion of exploitation in the context of ethnographic research, Hammersley and Atkinson note that, due to the many material factors as well as subjective components involved, it can be difficult to determine whether a researcher is exploiting his or her subjects. They explain that there may be both “Benefits and costs for those involved in the research, but these are never easy to assess. As a result, there are problems surrounding judgements about what exactly constitutes exploitation” (Hammersley and Atkinson 218). Hammersley and Atkinson indicate that to ascertain whether the researcher has entered into an exploitative relationship with a subject there must be some form of “Comparison between what is given and what is received and/or between what is contributed to the research by each side. And yet, of course, most of the benefits and costs, and the relative contributions, cannot be measured, certainly not on

any absolute scale. Whether or not exploitation is taking place is always a matter of judgement, and one that is open to substantial reasonable disagreement” (Hammersley and Atkinson 218). Determining whether or not the subjects of ethnographic research are exploited is a delicate task of balancing the benefits and compensation that a subject receives against the demands and impacts they may have to endure as a result of the research. Nevertheless, it is clear that *some* benefit or compensation must be offered to the participants as part of the research design. In the case of coolhunting, however, representatives of the subcultures receive no compensation. Although the coolhunter informants are offered nominal compensation, the individuals they study are given no form of credit or compensation for their ideas and styles, which the coolhunters harvest and profit from. Not only does coolhunting violate informed consent and the privacy of subcultures but it also fails to equitably credit or compensate the individuals (and subcultures) whose ideas it co-opts. This co-optation equates to exploitation and theft. In the example of the Look-Look informant shown by *Frontline*, the youths she invites to pose for photos are told that images will simply appear on a ‘street culture’ website. The informant neither declares that the information (i.e. the subject’s image) that is collected may be sold for profit, nor does she request their permission for corporations to reproduce their styles for commercial gain. This theft is, of course, rooted in the basic breach of proper informed consent, but its implications span further than the ethical conduct of ethnographic research. We can reasonably conjecture that, had these individuals been properly informed of the motives of the research, they may have responded differently.

The exploitative nature of coolhunting raises further questions about what other harm such a profit-driven application of ethnographic research can cause. Hammersley and Atkinson outline the various ways in which ethnographic research can have damaging consequences not only on research subjects, but also on the people who are close to, or who otherwise interact with them. They explain that “The research process may also have wider ramifications, beyond immediate effects on people actually studied, for instance for broader categories of actors or for one or more social institutions” (213). As previously established, coolhunting harms the subcultures it studies by facilitating their cooptation to capitalist production, and thus making them uncool, and in effect ‘killing’ them. Of course, this type of devastation would certainly raise serious concern and protest in the academic ethnographic community, should their attention be brought to the fact that coolhunters label their work under the same name.

The harm and destruction resulting from coolhunting brings us to the last key ethical consideration in ethnographic research: the impacts that research may have on the field of ethnography itself and how these consequences may impact future work in the social sciences. As Nigel Fielding stresses, “Researchers should not spoil the field for those who may follow” (Fielding 161). The discussion so far has illustrated that researchers have a responsibility to their subjects and the cultures they study; however, social scientists must also be held accountable to subsequent researchers and future work in the discipline. Hammersley and Atkinson explain that “Social researchers, and especially ethnographers, rely on being allowed access to settings. Research that is subsequently found objectionable by the people studied and/or gatekeepers may have the effect that

these and other people refuse access in the future. If this were to happen on a large scale, ethnographic research would become virtually impossible” (Hammersley and Atkinson 218). Respect for future research is particularly significant when evaluating the type of ethnographic study conducted by coolhunters which (as previously indicated) not only kills the very thing it researches, but also continuously accelerates the chase for cool, making future coolhunting research increasingly challenging (Southgate 179).

In contrast to academic ethnography studies, coolhunting operates within an unregulated environment, meaning that the practices of its researchers are not guided by, or held to account against, any type of ethical framework or academic rigour. This lack of discipline and standards is apparent in Gladwell’s assessment of Didi Gordon’s coolhunting work, in which he admits, “How good is she? I think she is as good as anyone is at this game. And it [. . .] is a difficult thing to quantify, of course. It’s not a science. It’s really a question, ultimately, of how much do you trust the person who is doing the interpretation and how good are their instincts” (PBS *Frontline* “Merchants of Cool”).

Coolhunting – Implications Understood through the Circuit of Culture Model

Coolhunters gather data primarily through observation and very brief interaction with their subjects. Their weak methodology and lax ethical standards suggest that coolhunters gather data and offer reports that are potentially imprecise, at best. This, compounded with the vast numbers of in-field researchers (informants) who have no rigorous training and monitoring, points to lack of both methodological and ethical accountability in coolhunting practices. Although coolhunting’s profit-driven motivations can be criticized

for their narrow and self-interested focus, it is the violations of established fieldwork practices and ethical conventions that definitively illustrate the damaging characteristics of the practice of coolhunting. The meanings that coolhunters feed to corporate producers of culturally-relevant goods are an incomplete and inaccurate representation of their original meanings. The consequences of this stretch beyond the individual subjects of coolhunting to the future of the practice itself. Indeed, coolhunting poses broad implications to the survival of counter-hegemonic meanings and to the notion of agency within the consumption of mass produced culture (as framed by the circuit of culture model).

From the perspective of the circuit of culture model, coolhunted subcultures represent a key example of agency and resistance within the realm of the consumption of mass produced goods. Writers such as Heath and Potter and Lipovetsky employ terms such as youth street cultures, or street styles, in reference to these subcultures. These phrases encapsulate two of their key characteristics: one, that the youth who developed them are frequently observed loitering, or ‘hanging out’ in the streets; and, two, that these styles did not originate from fashion houses and designers, but rather, were created by the youth ‘in the street’. While some authors make a distinction between subcultures and countercultures, for the purposes of efficiency and simplicity of reference, this discussion will use the terms subculture, counterculture, street styles and street culture interchangeably. The meanings decoded and encoded by subcultures that are then layered onto the symbolic and aesthetic dimension of goods represent a moment of agency in the

struggle against capitalist hegemony. As Hebdige indicates, “Subcultures are therefore expressive forms but what they express is [. . .] a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions” (Hebdige 132). Clarke et al. explain that even if certain subcultures are not consciously political, they offer youth an outlet for dealing with their experiences and “their highly ritualised and stylised form suggests that they [are] also *attempts at a solution* to that problematic” (Clarke et al. 47). In other words, subcultures provide an opportunity to win a position of opposition; they represent an opportunity for self-expression, agency and resistance.

In contrast to the above arguments, Heath and Potter disagree with the harsh criticism of coolhunting’s role in the co-optation of subcultural meanings. They argue that “The idea that these people are generational sellouts, [. . .] is a bit overdone since there isn’t much to sell out in the first place. If anything, they perform a valuable service for low-status (i.e. uncool) groups, by giving them more rapid access to what is cool” (Heath and Potter 217). Heath and Potter’s argument stems from the premise that cool does not truly run counter to the capitalist hegemony. They believe that countercultural meanings are readily embraced by corporations because, rather than being truly oppositional or subversive, they are just a new flavour of consumerism. Heath and Potter echo Lipovetsky’s notion of the democratization of fashion, adding that cool is agreeable to capitalism because “Rebellion is one of the most powerful sources of distinction in the modern world” (Heath and Potter 175). They explain that “There never was any tension between the *values* of the counterculture and the functional requirements of the capitalist

economic system;” and that “Cool – is the lifeblood of capitalism. Cool people like to see themselves as radicals, subversives who refuse to conform to accepted ways of doing things. And this is exactly what drives capitalism” (Heath and Potter 3, 205). Heath and Potter too quickly jump from recognizing the ongoing cycle of subcultures and their commercial co-optation, to arguing that the two have always been intertwined. In doing so, they fail to recognize that the emergence of new subcultures and their commodification have never been simultaneous, but rather that subcultures emerge from small independent groups of youth who generate new, oppositional ideas. Heath and Potter are correct in asserting that there exists an ongoing cycle of co-optation between subcultures and capitalist producers. Hebdige also recognizes this point, arguing that “[y]outh cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones” (Hebdige 96). Although Heath and Potter recognize that cool is coveted by corporations, they neglect the important fact that cool is *generated* by subcultures and *then* co-opted, reduced and commodified by corporations.

Despite Heath and Potters reservations, youth subcultures are indisputably an example of the circuit of culture model in practice. They demonstrate how the notion of agency within the model consists of the circulation and adjustment of meanings. These subcultures illustrate how consumption is “not a passive process, but an active one, involving the signifying practice which puts to use the ‘polysemic quality of commodities’ (that is, the possibility that multiple meanings can be attached to them) as signs” (du Gay et al. 104). Lipovetsky also articulates the linkages between cool style and

countercultural resistance. He explains that countercultural styles represented not only a vast departure from the traditional status hierarchy, but also helped to influence social change. As he explains:

These codes proliferated by way of the anticonformist youth culture, which had multiple manifestations in dress and appearance and also in values, tastes and behaviour. The exacerbated non-conformity of this youth culture had its roots not only in strategies of differentiation with respect to the world of adults and other youth, but also more profoundly, in the development of mass hedonistic values and in the young people's desire for emancipation in connection with the progress of the democratic individualist ideal. Historically speaking, what matters most is that the impetus for these trends came from outside the bureaucratic system that characterizes modern fashion. (Lipovetsky 104-105)

Lipovetsky believes that the democratization of fashion resulted in greater social acceptance of youth, including the playfulness and aesthetically unrestricted nature of street styles as well as the rebellious, subversive and individualistic values which these styles represented.

Coolhunters – Priests of Cool or Stalkers of Youth

As established in the previous chapter, coolhunting adds an extra layer of decoding/encoding to meanings as they flow through the circuit of culture. So far the discussion has established that beyond violating accepted ethical principles, coolhunting

methodology lacks the rigor to accurately represent the information and associated meanings and they collect. The following analysis of coolhunting will situate these concerns within broader theoretical critiques and will explore its impact on oppositional meanings and agency.

Klein questions the near-supernatural ability that coolhunters claim to possess. She writes:

Of course all this has to be taken with a grain of salt. Cool hunters and their corporate clients are locked in a slightly S/M, symbiotic dance: the clients are desperate to believe in a just-beyond-their-reach well of untapped cool, and the hunters, in order to make their advice more valuable, exaggerate the crisis of credibility the brands face. On the off chance of Brand X becoming the next Nike, however, many corporations have been more than willing to pay up. And so, armed with [. . .] their coolhunters, the superbrands became the perennial teenage followers. (Klein 73)

Klein accuses coolhunters of being “the legal stalkers of youth” who usurp subcultural meanings and ideas for profit (Klein 72). She points to various subcultural movements that were co-opted by large corporations, talking at length about the example of grunge. Grunge emerged as a counterculture which expressed opposition to capitalism and consumerism – it “possessed a genuine, if malleable, disdain for the trappings of commercialism” (Klein 83). Klein explains that “What was ‘sold out’ in Seattle, and in every other subculture that has had the misfortune of being spotlighted by coolhunters,

was some pure idea about doing it yourself, about independent labels versus the big corporations, about not buying into the capitalist machine” (Klein 83). Coolhunters took the oppositional meanings of grunge and fed their corporate clients a diluted simulacrum of those ideas. For example, when Sputnik’s co-founders Lopiano-Misdom and De Luca refer to grunge, they reduce its meaning to “a fashion scene” that “teaches us how to dress down” (Lopiano-Misdom and De Luca 9, 19). By failing to convey the deeper oppositional meanings that the grunge subculture had encoded onto its unkempt attire and alternative music, coolhunters helped reduce grunge to simply a style of dress. Southgate summarizes this phenomenon, stating that, “The Coolhunt, therefore, is connecting with Cool Consumerism. It is not connecting clients with any deeper understanding of cool” (Southgate 176).

Klein argues that grunge was but one of many subcultures that in some way opposed hegemonic meanings but were co-opted with the help of coolhunters. In addition to grunge, Klein points to American hip-hop as another key recent example of a subculture co-opted with the aid of coolhunters. She argues that the co-optation of hip-hop is illustrative of how coolhunting assisted corporations to co-opt and exploit identities, styles and meanings of marginalized subcultures (Klein 73-76). Klein indicates that the hip-hop subculture was perhaps one of the most aggressively coolhunted and co-opted, noting that “the cool hunters’ first stop was the basketball courts of America’s poorest neighbourhoods” (Klein 74). She concludes her critique of coolhunting by observing that, “Cool hunters reduce vibrant cultural ideas to the status of archaeological artefacts, and drain away whatever meaning they once held for the people who lived them” (Klein 84).

However, she adds that, “This has always been the case. It’s a cinch to co-opt a style; and it has been done many times before on a much grander scale than the minor takeover of drag and grunge” (Klein 84). Of course, concerns around corporate co-optation of subcultural movements predate coolhunting; however, the cold efficiency of instrumental rationality which coolhunting exhibits, point to a new, more threatening and effective form of co-optation.

Co-optation Theory (Commodification and Enclosure of Meanings)

Connected with Hammersley and Atkinson’s discussion of the impacts of making the private public, co-optation theory expresses concerns regarding the commercialization of subcultures. The concept of a theory of co-optation appears in many discussions of coolhunting, including those of Heath and Potter, Klein, Southgate, and Thomas Frank. Co-optation theory argues that cool meanings belong to the subcultures that created them and should not be hunted down and used as a resource for the corporate manufacture of goods (Southgate 176-175). The theory contends that coolhunting ‘steals’ cool meanings and layers them onto objects (commodities) in a way that reinforces capitalist hegemony. The co-optation argument is reminiscent of the Frankfurt School’s warnings about instrumental rationality’s assimilation and reduction of oppositional meanings, through their incorporation into capitalist production. This theme has also been analysed by cultural studies scholars, such as Hall and Hebdige, who recognize that corporations and the media:

Not only record resistance, they ‘situate it within the dominant framework of meanings’ and those young people who choose to inhabit a spectacular youth culture are simultaneously *returned*, as they are represented on T.V. and in the newspapers, to the place where common sense would have them fit [. . .]. It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology. (Hebdige 94)

From early subcultures such as the Mods in the 1950s, to the hippies in the 1960s, the punks in the 1980s, and grunge and hip-hop in the 1990s, subcultural meanings have been co-opted by corporate producers of fashion, music and other goods. Co-optation has been an essential element of fashion and other forms of mass production and consumption long before coolhunting appeared. Hall and his fellow scholars recognize co-optation as a factor in the circuit of culture model. Co-optation is the “dialogue” that closes the circuit in the “ongoing cycle of commodification” where consumers’ meanings are (re)produced by corporations (du Gay et al. 103). The circuit of culture model argues that, although corporations co-opt meanings and (re)code them using their own hegemonic positions, they are neither fully capable of compromising the consumers’ meanings, nor can they completely dictate how later users will decode those meanings. However, Gladwell, Southgate, Heath and Potter and even coolhunters such as Gordon herself, maintain that coolhunting kills the very thing it discovers. In her interview in the Frontline documentary, Gordon admits that coolhunters:

Take it, they tweak it, they make it more acceptable, and that's when the mass consumer picks up on it and runs with it and then it actually kills it. [. . .] It used to take a year-and-a-half to two years for something to move. And now it can take a couple of months. [. . .] It has to move faster. Companies have to get on it quicker. They have to be more informed of what's happening, be able to change the ways they produce things. ("Merchants")

This poses serious implications from the critical theory perspective. Through its facilitation of the co-optation and commodification of meaning, coolhunting helps to close off certain threads of oppositional discourse by recoding those meanings in favour of profit and capitalism. These factors suggest that co-optation aided by coolhunting causes greater damage to subcultures and their meanings than the 'traditional' co-optation which has been going on for decades.

Coolhunting accelerates the turnover of trends and consequently the creation of new ones (Southgate 179). This acceleration limits the natural development of oppositional meanings from within subcultures, which would otherwise permit better articulation of these meanings and also allow them to diffuse and reach a wider section of consumers. In turn, this limits the complexity and clarity of these meanings and their capacity to resist hegemony. Klein argues that, "In a climate of youth-marketing frenzy, all culture begins to be created with the frenzy in mind. Much of youth subculture becomes suspended in what sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papsen call 'arrested development,' noting that 'we have, after all, no idea of what punk or grunge or hip-hop as social

movements might look like if they were not mined for their gold''' (Klein 66). Klein explains that grunge, like many other subcultures, was so easily and completely co-opted because its ideas were not well developed and lacked the intellectual rigor in order to be considered true political movements (Klein 82-84). Conceivably, coolhunting's unnatural acceleration of the co-optation, diffusion and innovation of new ideas both reduces their ability to reach and influence a wider number of consumers in their original form and limits their potential evolution into better-articulated oppositional ideas that could have political significance.

Exploitation of the Intellectual Commons

Coolhunting represents a new frontier of capitalist enclosure and the commodification of meanings through its exploitation and depletion of the intellectual and cultural commons¹⁶. In the same way that corporations exploit natural resources, such as mineral deposits or water, coolhunters plunder the creative and intellectual commons. Southgate explains that "What is important [. . .] is that these cool contrivances were conceived by individuals and without marketing gain in mind. While this remains true, cool can be said to belong to us all. When only corporately sponsored cool can spread, this stops being true" (Southgate 178). The ideas that coolhunters collect belong to individuals and their

¹⁶ The notion 'enclosing' (exploiting) the commons is articulated by David Bollier in his book the *Silent Theft*. The 'commons' include both tangible and intangible public assets, from forests and oil to public spaces and institutions, knowledge and culture. Bollier examines a variety of examples of 'enclosure' where of the public 'commonwealth' is sold or handed over by government to private corporations. Bollier links together the socio-economic and environmental impacts of enclosing the commons, including: the privatization and monopolization of previously shared public assets; the threat to environmental sustainability; the decline of democratic and academic discourse and accountability, as well as the rise of rampant commercialization.

groups. Without the co-optation of those ideas by coolhunters, they would have the opportunity to diffuse across society on the basis of a more natural rhythm, becoming part of the cultural commons. Coolhunting represents the privatization and exploitation of shared public assets, which threatens the sustainability of creativity as well as agency and political discourse in the realm of popular culture consumption. Southgate also laments that coolhunting depletes creativity by reducing investment in professional creative product development. He argues that rather than paying coolhunters for “manipulating and hijacking existing forms of cool,” corporations should invest in developing their own resources by, for instance, hiring more professional designers and supporting the development of those talents (Southgate 177, 180).

Integrity of Meanings within the Circuit of Culture

Does coolhunting sufficiently limit the potential for agency to such an extent as to render the circuit of culture model irrelevant? This question is explored in the following discussion. Coolhunting clearly affects the authenticity, longevity and thus the power of oppositional subcultural meanings and ideas. However, Hall reminds us that, despite corporate incorporation of meanings, some elements of those ideas are retained and, thus, are not completely depleted (du Gay et al. 103). It is the compromise represented by co-optation that embodies the ongoing struggle over meaning within the context of mass culture consumption. In spite of co-optation, the meanings created by the grunge scene affected millions of youth who listened to its music and the messages communicated by its iconic figures, and adopted its clothing styles. Furthermore, although the version of grunge that made its way into the fashion industry was a diluted form of the original

meanings, its incorporation still enriched and diversified the world of fashion.

Consequently, its appearance on the runways and in fashion magazines may have also peaked the interest of a broader range of individuals, perhaps inspiring them to further explore the deeper meanings of the style.

There are two ways to look at the layer of encoding/decoding that coolhunters generate.

On the one hand, coolhunters add another layer of encoding/decoding to meanings as they move along the circuit. Unlike the negotiated or oppositional codes that are applied by consumers, the professional code of coolhunters, “operates within the ‘hegemony’ of the dominant code and serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely bracketing their hegemonic quality” (Hall, “Encoding, decoding” 101). From the hegemonic perspective, coolhunters do not really ‘short circuit’ oppositional meanings as they move through the circuit, but simply add an additional layer, or step, in the incorporation of meanings by corporate producers. However, from the perspective of consumers, especially the subcultures who initially generate the meanings and cultural styles at issue, coolhunting not only adds an additional layer of encoding/decoding, but also distorts and enables the premature uptake and formalization of meanings as part of commercial strategies.

Although the phenomenon of coolhunting in some ways necessitates adaptations to the circuit of culture model, it also demonstrates its ongoing relevance. The wide-spread use of coolhunting demonstrates that business and marketers continue to grapple with the unpredictable nature of consumer behavior. Thus, while the Frankfurt School would

likely see coolhunting as a tool of instrumental rationality, the very existence of coolhunting also points to the fact that the culture industry continues to struggle to maintain hegemony. The success or failure of a cultural product, such as a new fashion, continues to ultimately lie in the hands of consumers. Even with the addition of coolhunting as a stage (or short circuit) in the circuit of culture, the model illustrates that no stage in the circuit can completely dictate meanings at subsequent stages. The source of the coveted cool remains within the realm of youth subcultures (consumers), and not capitalist producers. Although coolhunting limits the depth and complexity of meanings it helps to reproduce, it does not remove all traces of their original oppositional capacity. Therefore, coolhunting does not completely destroy the capacity for agency within the circuit of culture model. Nevertheless, coolhunting's unethical and exploitative nature embodies the logic of instrumental rationality, and thus the tension between meanings and their exhaustion persists, and is brought into sharp focus by this practice.

Coolhunting facilitates a premature absorption of ideas into capitalist production, and thus limits the development and evolution that these meanings might otherwise undergo in order to become stronger and better articulated positions. Reflecting the logic of instrumental rationality, coolhunting increases the risk that cultural meanings will not attain their full oppositional potential. For example, if the grunge subculture had not been coolhunted and co-opted so early on, it is possible that it may have become better articulated as a radical critique of capitalism and consumer society. Instead, from its early development to the time it disappeared from the mainstream (a period of only five years), the anti-corporate messages which it tried to convey are remembered only as ragged

sweaters, plaid shirts and Doc Marten boots (Mendes and De La Haye 254-255). By uncooling what it discovers, coolhunting accelerates the generation of new meanings at an ever-increasing rate. This, in turn, affects the quality and creativity of popular culture products. Mark Crispin Miller, for instance, argues that for these reasons, coolhunting brings down the overall texture and quality of popular culture, reducing it to puerile and intellectually corrupt content with meanings that are geared to the lowest common denominator. Crispin Miller explains:

When you've got a few gigantic transnational corporations, each one loaded down with debt, competing madly for as much shelf space and brain space as they can take, they are going to do whatever they think works the fastest and with the most people, which means that they will drag standards down. They'll go directly for the please [*sic*] center. [. . .] what this means is that they are going to do as much trash as they can, because that will grab people. [. . .] They're trying to sell as much junk as they can by appealing to the worst in all of us, but they do it [with] some extremely civilized means. ("Merchants")

As with any resource that is mined or harvested too rapidly, without allowing it sufficient time to re-grow, coolhunting affects the level of creativity and depth of meaning not only of the subsequent subcultures but also of the popular culture products that reproduce them. As Crispin Miller adds, "This speaks to the inexorable narrowing of the range of content, despite the fact that so many champions of the status quo keep talking about all

the choices that we all now enjoy” (“Merchants”). Crispin Miller’s critique echoes Adorno and Horkheimer’s criticisms of the culture industry:

By craftily sanctioning the demand for rubbish it inaugurates total harmony. [. . .] The result is a constant reproduction of the same thing” (Adorno and Horkheimer 134), where “the fusion of culture and entertainment that is taking place today leads not only to a depravation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement. [. . .] Amusement itself becomes an ideal, taking place of the higher things of which it completely deprives the masses. (Adorno and Horkheimer 143)

Similarly, drawing on the work of Marcuse we could describe coolhunters as aiding and abetting the reduction and assimilation of oppositional meanings where “the Great refusal is in turned refused; the ‘other dimension’ is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs. The works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society [. . .]. thus they become commercial – they sell, comfort, or excite” (Marcuse 64). As Southgate suggests, coolhunting’s exploitation of subcultures may lead not only to its own demise but the decline of the cool oppositional subcultures themselves. Southgate observes that:

Coolhunters should be worried because this cycle will ultimately be bad for business. The reason is simple. The cycle that is being accelerated is not the cycle of cool itself, but the cycle of cool consumerism. The faster the cycle of cool consumerism becomes, the more expensive it is for brands to chase it and more

expensive it is for consumers to keep up. Something will give. Could it be possible that cool will stop being cool? (Southgate 179)

Southgate envisions that potentially cool consumption could be replaced with other motivations such as ethical consumption. However, his positive outlook forgets to recognize that ethical motivations for consumption (such as environmental responsibility or ethical production of goods) are already variations of cool consumption that have long been co-opted by the capitalist corporations.

Southgate's earlier-mentioned comparison of coolhunting to ethnography's dark history as a colonialist and imperialist tool is certainly accurate. Gareth Stanton, in his "Ethnography, Anthropology and Cultural Studies: Links and Connections," describes how ethnographic study and anthropology "Came to be viewed in some sense as the handmaiden of colonialism or imperialism, or indeed both" (Stanton 339). In the same manner, coolhunting can be viewed as the servant of capitalism's efforts to co-opt and exploit subcultures and their meanings. Because of its methodological weakness, its ethical short-comings and its impact on the circulation of meanings, coolhunting poses a threat to subcultures, oppositional thinking, agency and resistance within the realm of popular culture. Although it does not completely eliminate the element of resistance, struggle and agency within the circuit of culture, coolhunting contributes to the management of consumption while assimilating and reducing oppositional meanings, and can certainly be classified as a tool of instrumental rationality. Ultimately, then, it appears that we are torn between the recognition that the co-optation of cultural meanings and

styles to the logic of instrumental rationality is a powerful and colonizing force, but also, as Hall's encoding/decoding and the circuit of culture models teaches, that on some level, authenticity and oppositionality can never be fully erased.

Conclusion: Coolhunting and the Ongoing the Viability of Popular Culture as a Site of Struggle against Capitalist Hegemony

Summary

This thesis has presented the circuit of culture model as a viable response to the highly critical and pessimistic critique of mass culture presented by the Frankfurt School. At the time of their writing, the Frankfurt School defined popular culture primarily as mass produced news and entertainment media; however, in present-day late capitalism, a much broader range of mass produced consumer goods that are layered with meanings and culturally-relevant aesthetic styles must be accounted for (Lash and Urry 3). In this sign economy, producers not only encode, but also co-opt and reproduce meanings onto their products. In this context, access to consumer goods in the sign economy has not only been industrialized but democratized; cool has replaced class, and other tensions abound. Cool is thus fully enmeshed in the shift from industrial capitalism to the economies of signs in the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Cool is desirable for corporations, but difficult for them to access. Rebellious and oppositional meanings embody the important value of 'cool' and are hunted down with fervour by coolhunters who, like the ethnographers who worked for colonial powers past, perform the role of agent provocateurs for multinational corporations. Coolhunting's profit-driven motivations can readily be criticized for their narrow and self-interested focus and exploitative tendencies, but it is the systematic and wholesale violation of established ethnographic methodological practices and ethical conventions associated with this form of inquiry that truly lays bear the inadequacies of coolhunting as a research practice and its place within contemporary capitalism.

Coolhunting inhibits the flow of meanings through the stages of the circuit of culture model by acting as a third party in the exchange of meanings between consumers and producers. Unlike academic ethnographers, who follow established methodological and ethical principles, coolhunters are not regulated and appear to have little, or no, structure of accountability for either their conduct or the impact of their work. Consequently, the meanings that coolhunters feed to corporate culture producers are instrumental representations of consumer-generated (subcultural) meanings. Coolhunting also accelerates the movement of ideas through the circuit of culture, which hastens the process of production and consumption at the expense of oppositional meanings and the potential to resist or challenge capitalist hegemony. In so doing, coolhunters contribute to the premature death of subcultures as well as to an overall decline in the creativity and quality of meanings while contributing to an 'excess of signs' in increasingly aesthetically- and culturally-saturated economies. As a result of its methodological weaknesses, ethical short-comings, and impact on the circulation of meanings, coolhunting poses a threat to subcultures, oppositional thinking, agency and resistance to the capitalist hegemony. Not only is its methodology questionable and the accuracy of its research dubious, but the *game* of coolhunting, unlike formal academic ethnographic research, is devoid of recognizable ethical and methodological standards.

Ultimately, coolhunting threatens the scope of influence of oppositional meanings as they travel along the circuit of culture. If the co-opted meanings circulating through the circuit are distorted, then their influence is also compromised, and agency and resistance are weakened. Furthermore, by facilitating and accelerating the co-optation and

commodification of oppositional meanings, coolhunting endangers the already limited capacity for agency and resistance within the circuit of culture. On a theoretical level, coolhunting does illustrate the existence of a circuit of culture, and indeed the very need for coolhunters underscores the fact that consumers possess intelligence and power which corporations must struggle against. This relationship highlights the struggle for capitalist hegemony depicted by the circuit of culture model and indicates that this struggle is far from complete. Furthermore, the attractiveness of the cool (oppositional) meanings to mass consumers also suggests that consumer society, however content, complacent or placated by high standards of living, still possesses a drive to question capitalist hegemony.

Coolhunting, therefore, provides an excellent testing ground for exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the circuit of culture model. Further research is needed to investigate how oppositional meanings are altered as they move the circuit of culture and to fully assess the power that coolhunters and capitalist corporations have in reducing and exploiting meanings. From a critical theory perspective, a circuit of culture model informed by more systematic analyses of coolhunting would draw closer attention to the practice and encourage more vigilant monitoring of its actions and impacts. This would not only enable the model to maintain its relevance but could inspire further analysis of the effects of coolhunting on oppositional meanings and culture. Such research could also be relevant to examining the contemporary relevance of the Frankfurt School.

Indeed, the impact of coolhunting on meanings, culture and agency illustrates the ongoing relevance of the Frankfurt School's critique of capitalist hegemony and the totalizing logic of instrumental rationality. As agents of instrumental rationality, coolhunters contribute to the reduction of meaning by assisting capitalist producers in managing, co-opting, and one-dimensionalizing oppositional meanings. Indeed, coolhunting embodies the critiques offered by Adorno and Horkheimer as captured in the following quote: "Previously, only the poor and savages were exposed to the fury of the capitalist elements. But the totalitarian order gives full rein to calculation and abides by science as such. Its canon is its own brutal efficiency" where "men become material, just as nature as a whole is material for society" (Adorno and Horkheimer 86 - 87). Coolhunters, like colonial ethnographers, are handmaidens of capitalist hegemony, incorporating and exploiting the resources of subcultures for profit, reducing the complexity and diversity of meanings within popular culture, and consequently depleting the overall quality of popular culture by accelerating and liquidating the 'cycle of cool' of oppositional meaning.

However, in spite of the negative impacts of coolhunting, the struggle for hegemony will continue as long as consumers encode/decode oppositional meanings onto culturally-relevant products. In this context, capitalist producers will continuously be forced to reassert their legitimacy in the face of ongoing questioning, not only by consumers, but by scholars who have not discarded the warnings of the Frankfurt School scholars.

The Future of Coolhunting

In recent years the term 'coolhunting' has expanded to include the discovery and tracking of any new form of trend – from those in the scientific fields to social trends practiced by average (non-cool) consumers. As Mark Moyes explains in his article, "Coolhunting 2.0," identifying new trends without judging their coolness may be the new direction for coolhunting (Moyes 31-33). Moyes suggests that the scope of prey of this new generation of coolhunters (trend watchers) has expanded beyond subcultural trends to include all trends emerging among mainstream consumers. In other words, the focus is no longer solely on individual mavericks from cool subcultural groups, but identifying and labeling broad new trends in larger consumer demographics amongst families, households and young professionals in general. Moyes explains that this new type of coolhunting represents a "more inclusive model. A model that is more [. . .] open" that focuses less on what is 'cool' and more on "trend watching" (Moyes 31, 32). This 'opening up' only increases the importance of accounting for coolhunting within the circuit of culture model and from the critique of late capitalism perspective offered by the Frankfurt School. On the one hand, the emerging variety of coolhunting may actually strengthen the potential for agency as identified in Hall's circuit of culture model. If corporations are increasingly concerned with the lifestyles and value-systems of average consumers, the meanings generated by these people can gain increasing influence within the capitalist system. However, the new coolhunting might also represent a threat as a wider-reaching technique of instrumental rationality that strives to manage and control a much broader range of people and meanings. Without ongoing critical observation and analysis of coolhunting, mass consumer society is indeed in danger of coming closer to a world

where: “the necessity inherent in the system [is] not to leave the consumer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible” (Adorno and Horkheimer 141).

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