

Identity seeking zeitgeist: I shop, therefore I am

Introduction

The Month CD-rom was a £15 million investment by *Times Newspapers Ltd* back in 2003. My dissertation will discuss the *identity seeking zeitgeist* in contemporary consumer culture and the notion that consumers have *I shop, therefore I am* mentality. These ideas are to be looked at in conjunction with an in depth textual analysis of *The Month*. Any academic subject requires a methodology for its systematic exploration of a topic. It must have ways of producing and analysing data so that theories can be tested, accepted or rejected. For my dissertation I will primarily be using the methodology of textual analysis to analyse *The Month* CD-rom.

Chapter Three - Consumers and Cultural Intermediaries will analyse *The Month* to see how it fits the idea of romantic, hedonistic consumption style, how there is now an emphasis on consuming luxury goods. Commodities are arranged into hierarchies, music charts and so on. I will argue how *The Month* also puts commodities into hierarchies of popularity. Baudrillard (1998) suggests that happiness is the main motivator for consumption; I will investigate how *The Month* could give consumers the feeling of happiness. I will be arguing that *The Month* could be seen to be similar to the window-shopping experience and how this is so.

Chapter Four - The Month and Extrinsic Commodity Values will include extensive textual analysis on *The Month* to see how it attaches extrinsic values to commodities, in other words how *The Month* operates in commodity fetishism. I

will analyse how *The Month* uses certain advertising devices and what impact these may have on the consumer. I will be arguing that *The Month* is a brand in itself, by looking at theorists' ideas of what brand is. I will conduct analysis of how the *Kids* section, in particular, is structured to be attractive to the younger consumer and I will be considering how *The Month* caters for different genre tastes, 'for people who step off the main groove' (Klein, 2000, p.63).

Let us break down my dissertation title choice and see how and why it is relevant. To discuss the idea of an *identity seeking zeitgeist* I will explore the magnitude of work on the topic of consumer culture and consumer behaviour, which are directly relevant to my textual analysis of *The Month*. I will select writers who are worthwhile to my textual analysis of *The Month*; further information on this selection can be found in *Chapter One – Literature Review*. Advertising and cultural intermediaries are vital elements of consumer culture as a whole. I argue that *The Month* team are cultural intermediaries, the main basis of *Chapter Three*.

The saying *I shop, therefore I am*, concerns the theory that consumers purchase commodities to express, or perhaps form, their own self-identity. I will look at many theorists' ideas on how consumers shop to form or express their self-identity and I will be applying these ideas to how *The Month* encourages consumption in this chapter. The selection of writers for this chapter can be found in *Chapter One – Literature Review*.

Chapter One:

Literature Review

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Chapter One: Literature Review

To discuss the idea of an *identity seeking zeitgeist* that contemporary society, mainly in Western countries, is infused with I will explore the magnitude of work on the topic of consumer culture and consumer behaviour. Selecting writers who will be worthwhile to my analysis of *The Month*. Advertising and cultural intermediaries are vital elements of consumer culture, to build consumer interest for various commodities and services. I view *The Month* team as cultural intermediaries, who are primarily responsible for informing consumers about cultural products. This is a point I will discuss in full in *Chapter Three*.

The saying *I shop, therefore I am*, concerns the theory that consumers purchase commodities to express, or perhaps form, their own self-identity. I shall be looking at many theorists' ideas on how consumers shop to form or express their self-identity and apply these ideas to how *The Month* encourages consumption. *Chapter Four* will focus on the identity side of consumption, using ideas on commodity fetishism and extrinsic commodity value.

Consumption and Consumers

Strinati (1995) expresses ideas on the development of a mass society and suggests that this has led to a culture of mass consumption of mainly popular and mass culture products. *The Month* tends to concern itself with advertising popular entertainment products. Once factories were built to produce commodities, that were believed to be able to make a profit, the importance of consuming these

commodities overtook that of producing them. 'The need for people to consume has become as important, if not strategically more important, than the need for people to produce.' (Strinati, 1995, p.236). This was fundamentally to facilitate paying back the companies for the financial output to set up production infrastructure, but also to start making a profit and continue to do so. This is where we saw:

'The growth of consumer credit, the expansion of agencies like advertising, marketing, design and public relations, encouraging people to consume, and the emergence of a post-modern popular culture which celebrates consumerism, hedonism and style.' (Strinati, 1995, p.236)

However, Edwards (2000) sees the end of the Second World War (1944 in Europe and Far East 1945) as the inception of shopping becoming a popular leisure activity. I want to suggest how *The Month* can be used as a leisure activity. This was a time when inheritance decreased as the prime way in which people acquired new items, known as the *patina system*. There was a move to extravagance and valuing newness. Edwards (2000) also considers the shopping ethos of the Western World as being day dreamily romantic, he backs this up by looking at Bauman's (1998) types of consumers – 'the repressed' and 'the seduced'. I shall classify *The Month's* consumers in terms of these two types in my analysis, to gain deeper insight into the type of consumer *The Month* attracts.

Lury (1996) also takes the viewpoint that consumers are romantic. She uses Campbell's (1989) work on the shift from a pleasing the senses form of consumption to a more hedonistic form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, linked to the Romantic ethic of these times (Lury, 1996, p.72). She cites Featherstone (1991) as calling this shift in consumption style 'calculated

hedonism, the calculated decontrol of emotions.’ (Lury, 1996, p.74). I want to suggest how *The Month* fits this argument of romantic, hedonistic consumption style. Looking at what types of products *The Month* advertises and reviews.

Edwards (2000) express window-shopping as an important style of consumption activity. I wish to discuss how *The Month* could be viewed as being similar to the window-shopping experience. Analysing how *The Month* is structured and aimed towards the consumer experience. Fiske (1989) concentrates on the act of consumption rather than discussing its history and origins. He disapproved of the theory that a mass society absurdly consumes every product it is offered without any choice. Like Edwards (2000), he discusses window-shopping and takes the idea further by suggesting people would not window shop if they were not in the process of making some form of consumer choice. Fiske (1989) looks at what shopping is an escape from and what it acts as a source for.

Cultural Intermediaries

I wish to argue that the team behind *The Month* are cultural intermediaries. By applying the following ideas about cultural intermediaries’ characteristics to *The Month*. Featherstone (1991) discusses the new petite bourgeoisie, a term used by Bourdieu (1984), this group can also be called cultural intermediaries. Featherstone (1991) suggests that cultural intermediaries ‘typically invest in cultural and educational capital.’ (p.99). He also views cultural intermediaries as responsible for the mass mediated and increasing post-modern cultural products and symbols.

Negus (2002) suggests that:

‘The central strength of the notion of cultural intermediaries is that it places an emphasis on those workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption.)’ (p.503).

He suggests that cultural intermediaries are reflexive and self-conscious. They are also required to find ways to become adept at masking and obscuring the tension between corporate knowledge and public ignorance. Nixon and du Gay (2002) suggest that cultural intermediaries have ‘a certain authority as shapers of taste and [are] the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions.’ (Nixon & du Gay, 2002, p.497). They also suggest that the study of cultural intermediaries has opened up an area poorly covered in cultural studies, that of cultural circulation.

‘They shift our attention away from the over-emphasis on the moment of consumption that has tended to dominate recent accounts of the commercial field.’ (Nixon & du Gay, 2002, p.498).

Advertising

Baudrillard (1998) looks at how consumer culture began and suggests that the search for happiness was, and still is, the underpinning motivation for consumption. More importantly, he also expresses ideas on how advertising became so important as a medium for selling and describes what advertising is and does. He sees advertising as the main contributor to commodities taking on meanings superfluous to their actual use value. I shall analyse *The Month* to see how they attach extrinsic values to commodities, in other words how *The Month* operates in commodity fetishism. Baudrillard's (1998) classic text was one of the first to focus on the process and meaning of consumption in present day consumer society.

Advertising is closely linked to other forms of media, using them as bookends to the adverts themselves, a point I shall be discussing in relation to *The Month*. Reviews and documentaries are included on the CD-rom, in amongst advertising for the various products.

Wernick (1991) argues that all of our contemporary discourse is saturated in the rhetoric of promotion. He suggests that where once we might have distinguished between advertising, marketing and PR as discrete promotional categories, today these forms merge and become interlocked in a self-referential nexus of signification. He concludes that it is virtually impossible to think beyond or outside such promotional discourse; we are all drawn, voluntarily or otherwise, to play the 'game' of promotion. This is closely linked to the idea of commodity fetishism and extrinsic values.

Klein (2000) demonstrates how brands have become omnipresent, not just in media and on the street but increasingly in the schools as well. The global companies claim to support diversity but their version of corporate multiculturalism is merely intended to create more buying options for consumers. Klein (2000) offers a comprehensive account of what the global economy has created and the actions taking place to impede it. I shall look at her ideas on the increasingly branded world in relation to how *The Month* is a brand in itself as well as the products, fellow brands, it seeks to advertise and sell.

There has been an abundance of similar anti-corporate books hitting the bookshop shelves in the last few years, one of which is Quart (2003). She highlights the corporate marketing strategies aimed at teenagers and pre-teen (tween) consumers

and takes a specific look at the way advertising and brand images are targeted at those most vulnerable to their enticements, in particular children and teenagers. As *The Month* has a section devoted to *Kids*, her ideas are very useful to my analysis. I will look at how this section is structured to be attractive to the younger consumer and the different marketing and advertising ploys being used. Quart's (2003) chapters *Cinema of the In-Crowd* and *Peer-To-Peer Marketing* seemed the most original, providing a genuine insight into the wider issue of teenagers and culture, rather than capitalism. She takes the view that teenagers do see past the ploys of advertising and keep companies on their toes to come up with new ways of selling to this very profitable consumer group.

Identity via consumption

Strinati (1995) argues we are all now part of the anomic society, unstable because of moral breakdown, as society has seen a decline in the structures of close-knit villages, the family and religion. These gave a sense of psychological identity, rules to live by and moralistic guidance. This leaves the anomic individual 'vulnerable to being manipulated and exploited by core institutions like the mass media and popular culture.' (Strinati, 1995, p.7). Both of which, mass media and popular culture, produce commodities to be purchased by the anomic individual, who may frequently question themselves about their identity.

The anomic individual lives in a world where there are now hardly any solid structures to grasp a sense of identity from. 'The individual is left more and more to his or her own devices, has fewer and fewer communities or institutions in which to find identity or values by which to live,' (Strinati, 1995, p.6). *The Month*,

I feel, is influential as a means for consumers to *shop, therefore they are*, a point I shall elaborate on later.

Quart (2003) concentrates on the use of brand names by teens and tweens and how this consumer group are being provided with a sense of self before they even know what their self is. Her discussion of films in this process of identify formation is vital when looking at *The Month* as a case study, as film is one of the areas *The Month* concentrates upon. Klein's (2000) discussion of her own University days is interesting to consider when looking at consumptions relationship with identity formation.

‘The world stretched out before us not as a slate of possibility, but as a maze of well-worn grooves like the ridges burrowed by insects in hardwood. Step off the straight line and narrow career-and-materialism groove and you just end up on another one – the groove for people who step off the main groove.’ (Klein, 2000, p.63).

I wish to see how *The Month* caters for different genre tastes, ‘for people who step off the main groove’ (Klein, 2000, p.63). There are many different products reviewed, discussed and advertised on *The Month*, however are they just following the mainstream trend or do they also cater for the more alternative art-culture consumer taste.

Lury (1996) discusses Giddens (1991) ideas of the reflexive nature of consumption, saying:

‘Consumer culture has contributed to a reflexive understanding of identity, in so far as it provides many of the resources with which individuals fashion their own personal and political identities.’ (Lury, 1996, p.240).

I will discuss how *The Month* offers consumers the chance to keep up with art-culture fashions and new releases. Linked to the idea of *I shop, therefore I am*, Featherstone (1991) discusses the trend of lifestyle at length, suggesting that the activity of consumption is a major part of creating and maintaining ones lifestyle. He writes about self-improvement via consumption and projecting oneself via what consumers purchase. I shall analyse how *The Month* suggests its products carry extrinsic values. In contrast, Fiske (1989) does not consider people now to solely base their identities on purchases.

‘Individuality is a construction of the social, of language, of gendered experience, of family, education, and so on; commodities are used to bear the already constructed sense of individual difference.’ (Fiske, 1989, p.37).

The Month is not the only way for a consumer to buy art-culture commodities. However, it is an exciting and rather unusual means for consumers to partake in consumer culture.

Chapter Two:

Methodology

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Chapter Two: Methodology

Any academic subject requires a methodology for its systematic exploration of a topic. It must have ways of producing and analysing data so that theories can be tested, accepted or rejected. For my dissertation I will primarily be using the methodology of textual analysis to discuss *The Month* CD-rom. This comes free with *The Sunday Times* on the last Sunday of every month. 'Culture goes live with sound and vision' suggests the tag line featuring within *The Month's* advertising campaigns.

The Month CD-rom was a £15 million investment by *Times Newspapers Ltd* back in 2003. It has been such a success in the UK that it has been licensed out to international territories. From March 2005, *The Month* will be produced on DVD format instead. *The Month* CD-rom offers many different sections; I will briefly mention what each section is and what it offers the consumer. *Feature* - a different band, actor, musical artist and so on is selected each month to be the main feature. This section offers the consumer in depth documentaries, images and on screen text about the featured.

Films - six cinema release films are reviewed and the consumer is able to watch the trailer for each. There is a *Best of the Rest* sub-section that deals with the films thought to be the less popular cinema releases that month. Also there is a film quiz, film teasers for coming months and reviews of DVDs out to rent and purchase.

Music – this section reviews twenty new album releases, giving the consumer a chance to hear audio samples from each and watch the music videos. Classical, jazz and world music are also covered. *Arts* – offers reviews and audio and / or visual clips of theatre, ballet, art exhibitions and so on. This section deals with high culture. They also have a sub-section called *Book of The Month*. *Games* – six PS2, Xbox, PC games are reviewed.

Kids – offers TV reviews, DVD reviews, an interactive cartoon called *Jessy the Jester*, a spot the difference game, a word search and a sub-section called *Stuff* that advertises *cool* new kiddie commodities. *TV & DVD* – offers *TV Musts*, a featured TV programme reviewed in depth, *TV DVD* and *Film DVD* reviews. *Listings* – offers the consumer a chance to plan their entertainment outings for the coming month and finally the *Shopping* section offers the user a chance to purchase products they have tested out by using *Virgin Megastores* online.

‘If you want to understand likely interpretations of a television programme, a book in a series, or an issue of a magazine, you must familiarize yourself with several episodes, books or issues. Don’t attempt to guess at likely interpretations from your exposure to a single episode, book or issue. This is how mad interpretations are produced.’ (McKee, 2003, p.93).

After looking at all the issues of *The Month* that had been published at the time of my research commencing, I have chosen to look exclusively at the *September 2004* issue. I believe this to be a typical example of *The Month* and it offers vast scope for interpretation. ‘...you should study enough texts in the series to get a sense of its own rules and how it works. If you only study one or two issues, books or episodes you’ll have no idea if they are odd examples of the (text) or completely typical.’ (McKee, 2003, p.94).

Let us examine the term text before moving on to discuss textual analysis in more detail. Whenever we produce an interpretation of something's meaning – an advert, a film and so on, we treat it as a text. Therefore, 'a text is something that we make meaning from.' (McKee, 2003, p.4). We analyse texts using a form of analysis similar to that used by forensic scientists, as we treat the text as a cluster of clues about how people have made sense of the world. Before you can perform textual analysis on a text you must first put it into context. This is why I want to discuss consumer culture and advertising in my dissertation, before focusing on *The Month*.

Textual analysis can be used as a systematic approach to understanding the meaning of an advertising text, in this case, *The Month*. The method has three steps: *identification of textual elements* - literary attributes or language used, *construction of meaning* - a sum of parts, the use of images and so on and *deconstruction* - the unsaid assumptions that challenge singular meaning, including the extrinsic values being added to products.

The Month CD-rom is my case study. Case studies make no claims to being representative, as it is only one example of something. However, *The Month* does not have any similar products to compare it with. The structure of it is similar to how a consumer would use a website, however, *The Month* remains unusual and extraordinary. The main objective of a case study is to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of that particular item or group under study. The main drawback of a case study is that it is not possible to generalise on the basis of its findings, as it is only one example of something. However, with using *The Month* as a case

study, as this is a one off item with nothing similar to compare it to, other than the other issues, its findings would be eligible for generalisation.

Textual analysis is a methodology, a data-gathering process. 'When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.' (McKee, 2003, p.1). There is no single correct representation of any part of the world. In the same way there is no single correct interpretation of any text. Therefore, when conducting textual analysis on *The Month*, it is important to keep in mind that other people could interpret the text differently to me, due to possible differences in their sense making compared to mine.

'It (methodology) can imply a standardized procedure that doesn't require any creativity or originality, a standardized recipe that anyone can follow and come up with the same answers everytime. Textual analysis isn't like that.' (McKee, 2003, p.118). Textual analysis is unscientific for two main reasons. Firstly, it does not produce quantitative data; interpretations are not given in percentages for example. Secondly, textual analysis is not iterable. That is to say it could not be repeated, as your interpretations are particular to you and your own sense making. Another researcher performing textual analysis on the same text would not necessarily draw the same interpretations.

Intertexts about the text you are looking at can provide you with other peoples opinions of the text. However, for *The Month* there is a lack of texts discussing it, thus making my dissertation unique. '...you can get a sense of likely

interpretations by looking at intertexts – publicly circulated texts that are explicitly linked to the text you’re interested in.’ (McKee, 2003, p.97).

Not all parts of a text are important to the research questions you are exploring, therefore I will only use examples from *The Month* that are related to the research questions I am working from. These are, in their embryonic state:

- How does *The Month* fit the argument of romantic, hedonistic consumption style?
- How can *The Month* be viewed as being similar to the window-shopping experience?
- How is *The Month* structured and aimed towards the consumer experience?
- Are the team behind *The Month* cultural intermediaries?
- How does *The Month* attach extrinsic values to commodities, in other words how does *The Month* operate in commodity fetishism?
- How is *The Month* a brand in itself as well as the products, fellow brands, it seeks to advertise and sell?
- How is the *Kids* section structured to be attractive to the younger consumer and what are the different marketing and advertising ploys being used?
- How does *The Month* cater for different genre tastes, ‘for people who step off the main groove’ (Klein, 2000, p.63)?
- How does *The Month* offer consumers instant gratification?
- How can *The Month*’s consumers be categorised by looking at Bowlby’s (1993) distinction between two different types of consumer?
- Which stage is *The Month* part of when looking at *The AIDA Model of Marketing*?
- How do *The Month*’s consumers fit Bauman’s (1998) classification of two types of consumers – ‘the repressed’ and ‘the seduced’?

- How does *The Month* offer to help the consumer to construct their lifestyle, part of self-identity?
- How is *The Month* a brand?
- How does *The Month* use sponsorship to help fund the production costs of the item itself?

Sometimes a more scientific way of analysing texts, without using numbers, is used. This methodology is called semiotics. This is looking at the use of words, colours, images and so on. 'The biggest advantage of semiotics is that it makes us stop and consider the various elements of the process of making meaning from a text – steps that we normally do automatically and easily.' (McKee, 2003, p.131).

I will be using semiotic analysis when looking at *The Month*.

In addition to conducting my own textual analysis I plan to read many theorists ideas on the topics I shall be covering. This has practical reasons as it saves time and money, as I do not have to conduct my own research; I can use the findings of others. As well as this, using other theorists gives me theories to prove, disprove and discuss. Detailed information about which theorists, texts and journals I will be using can be found in the *Literature Review* chapter.

Chapter Three:

Consumers and Cultural Intermediaries

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Chapter Three: Consumers and Cultural Intermediaries

The Month combines art-culture reviews with advertising to create a persuasive product that targets consumers interested in purchasing commodities superfluous to human needs. These products include DVDs, CDs, books, theatre trips, tickets for art gallery exhibitions, computer games and much more. It could be argued that people can live without these types of goods. If we did not listen to music or watch films, for example, we would not die. However, in the contemporary consumer culture we are somewhat made to believe we would. Lury (1996) suggests luxury products, that do not fulfil human needs, seemed to be the biggest drive for the shopping trend to take off.

‘It is widely argued that the art-culture system, (such as visual art, literature, music, radio, film and television), has influenced the development of consumer culture in a number of ways, particularly following the rapid growth in the so-called culture industry in the twentieth century.’ (Lury, 1996, p.53).

She advocates that the sale of DVDs, CDs and so on was, and is, an area of large consumer increase. ‘Goods, then, are the visible part of culture. They are arranged in vistas and hierarchies that can give play to the full range of discrimination of which the human mind is capable.’ (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p.80).

The Month arranges films, games, books, music and so on in to hierarchies. For example, in the *Film* section only six films are reviewed in detail with trailers, as they are considered to be the best out on release that month. They then have a *Best of the Rest* section where other films thought not to be as good by *The Month* team (cultural intermediaries) are given a small review each. (See Appendix One).

Consumers of art-culture goods are given a choice when they use *The Month*, but only from a pre-selected list.

Baudrillard (1998) looks at how the search for happiness is a major motivation for individuals to consume. *The Month* offers a vast array of mainly new art-culture products to the consumer. The content of *The Month* includes many extra features and substantial amounts of information for each product. This could be viewed to be giving the consumer a sense of happiness, as they browse through *The Month* they are able to find out details of multiple products in one place. Let us take a closer look at what is offered to the consumer when they use *The Month* and how these features could inspire feelings of happiness for them.

The *Film* section offers consumers reviews of films, cinema releases and DVD rental and purchase. For each film highlighted, the consumer can watch the trailer and read a short, yet in depth, review. *The Month* also covers films soon to be in cinemas. This may excite the consumer as they look forward to seeing the films reviewed and a sense of happiness develops. The section of *The Month* that offers most opportunities for consumer happiness is unsurprisingly the *Kids* section.

With a mixture of interactive cartoons, spot the difference games and word searches there are many activities to entertain the consumer. The trick here is to put the consumer, albeit a very young one, into a happy mood. Feelings of happiness then counterbalance and somewhat mask the advertising ploys being used. The *kid* then browses the *Stuff* section, which covers all manner of gizmos and gadgets from colouring pens to the new California three-wheeled scooter craze – *Trikke*. This may create feelings of happiness for the children when they

see these exciting new products, but happiness for the parents when their children pester them all the way to the toy store is probably non-existent.

In the Western world and societies run by capitalism, the essence of consumption is based on a 'romantic wish-fulfilment or day-dreaming' (Edwards, 2000, p.34) desire. There is now an ethos of immediate gratification and newness in Western world consumer culture. *The Month* offers consumers instant gratification, as they can read reviews, watch trailers and listen to audio samples then a few mouse clicks later they can purchase the product. This is made possible due to the collaboration with *Virgin Megastores*, which *The Month* uses for the actual selling part of their strategy.

The Month's consumers can be categorised by looking at Bowlby's (1993) distinction between two different types of consumer. She discusses the 'classical consumer' and the 'romantic consumer'. The first are rational and like to find bargains, where the second are irrational and pleasure seekers. *The Month's* target consumer would be the 'romantic' kind, as *The Month* advertises products that are for pleasure and not sold to fulfil human needs. CDs and DVDs, and even books read for leisure are not bargains, unless maybe purchased in a music store sale, but even then they are way over priced compared to the production costs.

The 'classical consumer' would buy his or her CDs from second hand music fares rather than purchasing these products when they are first released. They would also be more prone to downloading music for free (or at very slight cost) as they are seeking to acquire products as cheaply as possible. They are less concerned with image and the nature of shopping, unlike the 'romantic consumer'.

Featherstone (1991) calls this consumption style ‘calculated hedonism, the calculated decontrol of emotions.’ (Lury, 1996, p.74).

It is possible that consumers use *The Month* in a similar way that shoppers use the high street to window-shop. Edwards (2000) sees window-shopping as an important style of consumption activity that is increasingly common when examining a consumer’s relation with luxury goods, fashion for example. Edwards (2000) notes the reason for this increase is the shopping environment itself, ‘shopping malls as climate-controlled and glitzy zones providing acres of shop frontage precisely for voyeuristic purposes’ (Edwards, 2000, p.123). *The Month’s* shopping environment might not be in the form of a physical shop, however the use of bright colours, movie style transitions between pages of the CD-rom and ease of use all encourage the consumer to browse – window-shop (See Appendix Two).

Fiske (1989) comments on window shopping, saying that this activity is a ‘consumption of images, an imaginative if imaginary use of language of commodities that may or may not turn into the purchase of actual commodities.’ (Fiske, 1989, p.34). *The Month* illustrates Fiske’s (1989) point, as the structure relies heavily on images (See Appendix Three) and flamboyant hyperbole language, for example *The Month* uses the word *hot* in many instances – ‘*Previewing what’s hot for September*’. The consumer is aware that it is advertising to them indirectly, however I would suggest most tend to use *The Month* as a collection of reviews rather than a purchase opportunity.

Marketing and advertising these days are virtually interchangeable as terms. They are both part of the marketing mix. *The AIDA Model of Marketing* concerns how awareness leads to interest, which stimulates desire and turns into action or sale of consumer products. *The Month* is part of the awareness stage of this model, bringing to light the new releases of entertainment media via a CD-rom, as well as possible sales of the products it advertises. Consumers can browse the shelves in their underwear if they wish. In the company of others or alone. At any time of day or night and for as long as they want without being hampered by store security for loitering. They can window-shop.

‘Shopping malls are cathedrals of consumption...the metaphor of consumerism as a religion, in which commodities become the icons of worship and the rituals of exchanging money for goods become a secular equivalent of Holy Communion.’ (Fiske, 1989, p.13).

Similar to Bowlby (1993) as previously mentioned, Bauman (1998) also has distinguished two types of consumers – ‘the repressed’ and ‘the seduced’. ‘The seduced’ being those consumers who are financially secure and therefore can partake in consumer culture to whatever extent they wish. ‘The repressed’ being those who are state dependent, on benefits and have limited ability to be part of the consumer mass and therefore are more likely to participate in window-shopping to a greater extent.

The Month’s consumers fit both of these types. ‘The repressed’ consumer would be most likely to use *The Month* to window-shop *from home* and probably would not purchase much, if anything. However, ‘the seduced’ has the disposable income to use *The Month* to purchase art-culture commodities that catch their eye. They are able to be frivolous with consumption, unlike ‘the repressed’.

There has to be people responsible for choosing which products are to be included on *The Month* for these different types of consumers to purchase items. These people, I wish to argue, are cultural intermediaries. Featherstone (1991) considers culture intermediaries as responsible for the mass mediated and increasing post-modern cultural products and symbols. Cultural intermediaries have been named differently from theorist to theorist. Featherstone (1991) makes use of Marxist term *bourgeoisie* to explain the attributes of cultural intermediaries. He says:

‘The new petite bourgeoisie is a pretender, aspiring to more than he is, who adopts an investment orientation to life; he possesses little economic or cultural capital and therefore must acquire it. The new petite bourgeoisie therefore adopts a learning mode to life; he is consciously educating himself in the field of taste, style and lifestyle.’ (Featherstone, 1991, p.100).

The Month's team of cultural intermediaries use the task of choosing which products to include as a way to educate themselves and keep up to date and on the pulse with lifestyles, taste and art-culture. Edwards (2000) looks at *The McCann-Erikson Lifestyle Scale*. He suggests that cultural intermediaries would be the *Avant-Guardian* type of consumer, who are usually well educated and have an air of knowing better than the mass due to their high-supposed cultural capital. However, the only section of *The Month* that exerts cultural capital is the *Arts* section.

For Lury (1996), cultural intermediaries are a group that influences developments in fashion, style, art and culture, even if they do not have much in the way of economic wealth. For this issue of *The Month*, the cultural intermediaries chose to have the band *Oasis* as the main feature, offering vast amounts of information and images of the band in documentary form and on screen text. (See Appendix Four). This could theoretically have been any band or musical artist, but they chose

Oasis, for whatever reason, but probably mainly due to the band releasing a DVD biography. The cultural intermediaries put forth *Oasis* as important enough to be the featured band on this issue, however not all consumers would be interested in this band. Cultural intermediaries force upon *The Month's* consumers masses of information about a band they think to be influential and significant to the music world, suggesting they know what good music is. If *The Month* user does not like *Oasis*, they may still have a browse through this section just to feel informed.

‘Cultural intermediaries – amongst whom the young are visible but by no means dominant – are not the priests of sacred culture; instead ‘knowledge’ is assembled and dispensed to the public by a motley gang of bricoleurs, ironicists, designers, publicists, image consultants....’ (Lury, 1996, p.210).

Cultural intermediaries are style experts, image consultants with high cultural knowledge. They have their finger on the pulse of what is new and when focusing on *The Month*, what is *cool* in the entertainment sector.

Klein (2000) suggests that it has not all been plain sailing for cultural intermediaries, especially in the nineteen eighties. ‘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.’ (Klein, 2000, p.71). This meant they were out of touch with what was ‘cool’ and were lacking in information concerning what the ‘Xers, Generation Y and twenty-somethings’ wanted.

Klein (2000) suggests that there are different levels of cultural intermediaries. The first level grew too old to be on the pulse so they decided they had to take on younger workers, and termed them ‘change agents’. They were to breathe new

blood into the company and give insight into their consumer world. This was the plan anyway. Once change agents, now, the next level, 'cool hunters', '...would search out pockets of cutting-edge lifestyles, capture them on videotape and return to the clients...they would advise their clients, like Rebook, to use irony in their ad campaigns, to get surreal, to use 'viral communications.' (Klein, 2000, p.72). Old school cultural intermediaries grew old and employed change agents, who in turn lost their on the pulse freshness and were taken over by the cool hunters.

Negus (2002) suggests that 'The central strength of the notion of cultural intermediaries is that it places an emphasis on those workers who come in-between creative artists and consumers (or, more generally, production and consumption.)' (Negus, 2002, p.503). He suggests that cultural intermediaries are reflexive and self-conscious. They are also required to find ways to become adept at masking and obscuring the tension between corporate knowledge and public ignorance. *The Month's* team of cultural intermediaries tend to *mask* the mass of music, films, books and so on that are available to consumers, as they only select a few so-called popular choices to be reviewed and advertised each month.

Nixon and du Gay (2002) suggest that cultural intermediaries have 'a certain authority as shapers of taste and [are] the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions.' (Nixon & du Gay, 2002, p.497). *The Month's* cultural intermediaries exert their *taste authority* in a number of ways. They select art-culture products each month to be reviewed and advertised on *The Month*, but also intriguingly, they suggest to knowing your taste better than you do yourself by stating on some pages, especially the *Music* section, '*If you liked this album, try these*'. For example, *The Futureheads* new album is reviewed in the *Music* section

of this issue and the '*If you liked this album...*' selection is exceptionally eclectic, from similar new music like *Dogs Die In Hot Cars* to older similar music like *The Jam* (See Appendix Five).

As we have seen *The Month* is a powerful consumer product in itself, as well as advertising and reviewing other products selected by the cultural intermediaries, who form a large part of the production team. I want to move on to discuss commodity fetishism and identity formation / expression via consumption, both in relation to *The Month*.

Chapter Four:

The Month and **Extrinsic Commodity Values**

Identity seeking zeitgeist: I shop, therefore I am

Chapter Four: *The Month* and Extrinsic Commodity Values

Commodity fetishism is fuelled by the concept of brand and the adverts that express the extrinsic values that lead to this fetishism. Commodity fetishism is the way in which products are not looked at for what they really are, in their natural form, instead what they connote or signify to the consumer. *The Month* is active in developing commodity fetishism.

One of the first, if not *the* first, thinkers to write about commodity fetishism was Marx. 'A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.' (Marx, 1995, p.42). In the process of consumption, Marx (1995) suggests we become estranged from the literal nature of things, their construction from natural materials, but also from the use value of consumer goods. He saw that capitalism was driven by people's desire for objects of inflated value, luxury goods.

The Month advertises luxury goods – CDs, DVDs, theatre trips and so on. None of these are needed to survive, they do not satisfy human needs, just desires. His use of the term fetishism was anthropological in origin, as he saw commodities as the (then) modern equivalent of ancient objects of worship, for example, crucifixes and the Bible. *The Month* highlights art-culture commodities as being popular, that is to say they add certain fetishism to them. *The Month* seeks to make CDs,

DVDs, computer games and so on objects of worship, leading to consumer purchase.

The fetishism of the commodity in modern society is strategically manipulated in the practices of packaging, promotion and advertising. Through these, goods are fitted with masks specifically designed to manipulate the possible relations between things on the one hand, and human wants, needs and emotions on the other. *The Month* uses advertising in their commodity fetishism attempt. This is the case especially in the *Music* section (See Appendix Six). The use of album cover images of highlighted CDs and photographic images of the band or artist are shown rather than the actual product being advertised, the CD itself. The physical product does not seem to be of that much importance. It is the extrinsic values the consumer looks for now a days. Is it a *tasteful* brand? Does this CD fit my identity as an *indie* kid? And so on.

The extra features, the reviews, clips, trailers, behind the scenes documentaries, offered for each product highlighted may seem very useful and exciting to the consumer. However, they are only present to attach increased extrinsic values to the product. The main objective of this is to sell the product, but is this advertising gone mad? Can consumers be offered too much information? *The Month* could be seen as OTT – over the top – in their use of advertising devices.

Before *The Month's* main navigation page loads up, the consumer is confronted with an advert for a new car, nicknamed *The Only 1*, manufactured by sponsoring company *BMW*. After the advert runs, may I just point out that the consumer is able to skip watching this if they wish, the choice to see the extended advert, a

making of the advert documentary, in depth details of the car and the adverts soundtrack information are all on offer for the consumer to experience. It could be thought that this is overkill, a consumption atmosphere gone crazy. What *The Month* is doing here, or more precisely *BMW*, is in fact attaching extrinsic value to their product.

Many theorists since Marx have drawn on his ideas of commodity fetishism. Here, Lury (1996) expresses Marx's ideas in a simple manner. 'Marx used the term fetishism of commodities to describe the disguising or masking of commodities whereby the appearance of goods hides the story of those who made them and how they made them.' (Lury, 1996, p.41). Baudrillard (1988) has also written using Marxist ideas of fetishism.

'If needs were the singular, concrete expression of the subject, it would be absurd to speak of fetishism. But when needs erect themselves more and more into an abstract system, regulated by a principle of equivalence and general combinatory, then certainly the same fetishism is in play.' (Baudrillard, 1988, p.23).

Consumer needs, wants and desires are certainly not in the singular. People are greedy, consuming far beyond basic human needs for food, shelter, clothing and so on. *The Month* offers the luxury, leisure goods the conspicuous consumer desires. The consumer is made conscious that they express their identity not only with their clothes, but with their home, furnishings, car and other activities like which films they go to see, which restaurants they eat out at, these are all read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste. 'Consumerism is the technology of the self, then: through purchasing particular products, the adverts tell us, we can become like the liberated, aspiration beings seen in the ads.' (Gauntlett, 2002, p.129).

The Month allows consumers to browse art-culture commodities, which they may then purchase to express their taste and identity. Fiske (1989) sees consumption as an expressive device for an existing identity, rather than being an identity forming activity. However, Strinati's (1995) ideas suggest that consumption, popular culture and mass media are the only identity formation activities available to the anomic individual. From this viewpoint, *The Month* consumers purchase items from the cultural intermediaries pre-selected choice, to form their identity instead of merely expressing it.

Strinati (1995) points out that:

'Neither consumerism nor television form genuine sources of identity and belief, but since there are no dependable alternatives, popular culture and the mass media come to serve as the only frames of reference available for the construction of collective and personal identities.' (Strinati, 1995, p.239).

For Strinati, these dependable alternatives used to be strong social class divisions, religion, the neighbourhood and the nuclear family.

'Product personality, is an almost anthropomorphic transformation of a product into a type of person...' (Edwards, 2000, p.57). For consumers to purchase an item they feel will add to or change their own identity, the item has to have the desired attributes itself. Advertising and marketing are the prime channels for these supposed product personalities and attributes to be attached to commodities. Advertising in particular is able to exploit this freedom to attach images of romance, exotica, fulfilment, or the good life to mundane consumer goods such as soap, fridges and toilet paper.

The Month focuses on actors, band members, directors, ballet dancers and so on rather than what the CD looks like or how the cinema experience is going to be, which are what the consumer is actually going to buy. Somehow we have, as consumers, lost the ability to rationalise in our minds that even though the advert is amazing and we wish to be the people we see in it, we will not be gaining those attributes by handing over our money, we only get the CD or the cinema experience.

The connotations of products are attached mainly via advertising. 'The commodity form is essentially the mechanism through which advertising creates meaning and ideology.' (Edwards, 2000, p.64). Advertising, is seen, in the first instance, to structure wider social meanings so that they produce commodity sign value. Adverts take on human values or emotions and this in turn is transferred to the commodity being advertised. Secondly, as the underlying commodity form or mechanisms of advertising are already known to them, the audience are themselves drawn into a cycle of producing, rather than merely reading, commodity sign values.

'Possessions can be used to express, transform, even create identity, but this creation is not to be taken seriously – it is only play – and thus does not contradict the belief that we are who we are no matter what we possess.' (Lury, 1996, p.239). It seems that a lifestyle is more like a genre: whilst movie directors can choose to make a romance, or a western, or a horror story, we as directors of our own life narrative, can choose a metropolitan or a rural lifestyle, a lifestyle focused on success in work, or one centred on clubbing, sport, romance or sexual conquests. *The Month* offers help to the consumer to construct their lifestyle, part

of self-identity. The *Listings* section lets consumers '*Plan your outings for the month ahead.*' Finding theatre productions, films, gigs and so on in your area in the coming month. You can specify a venue, date and other variables. *The Month* acts as your TV guide, events planner, cinema listings guide, music store and so on, all in one place.

Consumers, especially the youth, spend much money on purchasing CDs, DVDs, cinema trips, gig tickets and other mass media products like NME music magazine. The desire and drive to buy these commodities is, I think two fold. There has to be an over riding real and true liking of these items, as consumers do not waste their hard earned money, or indeed their student loan, on items they do not like. This is the basic desire to consume. The second motivation I believe to be fairly subconscious in most consumers. This is the desire to express who they think they are or would like to be seen as, by peers and society as a whole.

Klein (2000) notes, in the contemporary consumer world '*...today's best known manufactures no longer produce products and advertise them, but rather buy products and 'brand' them, these companies are forever on the prowl for creative new ways to build and strengthen their brand images.*' (Klein, 2000, p.5). *The Month* has its own branding. They have a specific, if a little bland, logo and their overall brand identity makes use of bright colours and modern clean-cut shapes. Their television advertising is stark and modernist in style. Usually showing a young, professional male in a suit, supposedly in his home using *The Month* in his spare time.

The self-proclaimed inventor of Public Relations, a part of the advertising and marketing mix, is Edward Bernays. Contrary to his life's work in this field, he wished to stay relatively non-descript in the media world, fame was not his aim. With a family tree including Sigmund Freud, *the father of psychoanalysis*, Bernays became central in the social and psychological movement, which examined the change in consumption patterns being desire instead of needs led.

Bernays made use of his famous uncle Freud's ideas of *The Ego* – our sense of self, *Super Ego* – keeping a lid on desire and *Id* – housing our sexual desire. Foremost, however, Bernays wanted to use Freud's idea of *Id* as a means of manipulating mass desire, *the collective Id*. During the 1920s, Bernays biggest client was tobacco magnate George Washington Hill. Selling *Lucky Strike* cigarettes to women was Bernays' task in a social climate where only 12% of cigarette sales came from women. The increasing trend to be a slim female gave Hill and Bernays a starting point for the underlying theme for this advertising campaign. This was to suggest that smoking was a slimming aid. Bernays was able to exploit female desire, their *Id* in Freudian terms. The advertising slogan came to be '*Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.*'

Klein (2000) has extensively discussed the concept of the brand.

'What these companies produced primarily were not things, they said, but images of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing but in marketing. This formula, needless to say, has proved enormously profitable, and its success has companies competing in a race towards weightlessness: whoever owns the least, has the fewest employees on the payroll and produces the most powerful images, as opposed to products, wins the race.' (Klein, 2000, p.4).

The Month itself can be viewed as a brand. Buying *The Sunday Times* (when *The Month* is included on the last Sunday of every month) is seen to be good taste. *The Sunday Times* is a broadsheet rather than a tabloid, suggesting an intelligent, educated and middle to upper class readership. Consumers today are brand aware and even making a choice of what Sunday newspaper to buy is bound up with the extrinsic values attached to different newspapers.

Advertising is closely linked to other forms of media, using them as bookends to the adverts themselves. Wernick (1991) argues that all of our contemporary discourse is saturated in the rhetoric of promotion.

‘In the organs of print and broadcasting, information and entertainment are the flowers which attract the bee. In this sense, too, the non-advertising content of such media can be considered, even semiotically, as an extension of their ads.’ (Wernick, 1991, p.302).

Here Wernick (1991) is suggesting that in soap operas, articles in magazines and so on, product placement may be present and therefore when the ad break ends, or the page is turned in a magazine, the advertising does not necessarily end as everything media related is now so infused with advertising. The programmes on television are just the putty around the bricks of advertising, holding the advertising breaks up. Adverts pay for most of the programming that fills the gaps between the ad breaks.

The Month works in a similar manner as they have reviews and documentaries on the different products, yet these are of secondary importance, the real matter is the selling of the products. Added to this, the sponsorship *The Month* relies on is phenomenal. *BMW* is this issues’ main sponsor, but each section also has separate

sponsorship. For example, *Carolina Herrera* perfume sponsors the *Film* section, *Sadler's Wells Theatre* are the sponsors of the *Arts* section, *The Fantasy Game* sponsor the *Games* section, the *Kids* section is sponsored by *Barbie*, *LoveFilm.com* sponsor the *TV & DVD* section and *Virgin Megastores* is the *Shopping* section sponsor. Therefore are two tiers to *The Month's* advertising and marketing structure. Just like magazines and television channels feature advertising, to mainly pay for the programmes and articles they include, *The Month* uses sponsorship to help fund the production costs of the item itself.

The Month is involved in the identity via consumption trend, but I wish to focus on the young consumer now by looking at Quart's (2003) ideas on peer-to-peer marketing. She suggests:

‘Kids do peer-to-peer marketing for the same reasons they volunteer as consultants and shoppers: They mistake brand names for identity, or they believe their marketing puts them in closer contact with the bands, cosmetics, film stars, or web sites they are hawking.....In a sense, it provides these kids with a sense of selfhood before many of them have even recognized that they have a self...Girls are also more likely to use pop stars and clothes to anneal their fragmented self-esteem.’ (Quart, 2003, p.59).

She lays blame on what she terms ‘make-over films’ (Quart, 2003, p.115) for example, *Clueless* and *She's All That*, for the increase in teen consumption. She says that these films teach teenagers that ‘respect and a new self are merely a new slip dress or new lip gloss away.’ (Quart, 2003, p.115). *The Month* has a section dedicated to the younger consumer, aptly named *Kids* (See Appendix Seven). This offers information on kids DVDs and TV. As well as this, there is a special *The Month* cartoon called *Jessy the Jester*, a spot the difference game and a word search. Also, most staggeringly, there is a page called *Stuff*, where just about

anything from *Crayloa Crayon Markers* to *Stationary Backpacks* are advertised – true pester power in operation.

‘Many youth subcultures, for both genders, are characterized by a strong desire for up-to-date tastes, in dress and music particularly.’ (Fiske, 1989, p.42). *The Month* offers individuals a chance to keep up to date with what is new and cool, even if they do not purchase any of the reviewed items. Baudrillard (1998) suggests that all consumers are under this false spell of feeling they have to periodically ‘recycle themselves’ (Baudrillard, 1998, p.100) via purchasing new clothes, CDs and so on.

‘The field of pop music offers many icons and potential role models. Pop music today is not only the sounds on the recordings we buy, or hear on the radio or played in shops, cafes, bars and clubs, but is also the carefully packaged set of images we see through television and magazines.’ (Gauntlett, 2002, p.216).

I would suggest that music and film are the main signifiers used by youth today to express who they think they are. Fashion also features predominately as an identity expresser for youth, where fashion choice is more often than not decided upon in conjunction with music taste.

The Month may primarily concentrate on mainstream music and film, but they also include an *Arts* section. This is concerned mainly with so-called *High Culture*, ‘for people who step off the main groove’ (Klein, 2000, p.63). The main groove for *The Month* being mainstream popular mass-produced music and film. The *Arts* section in this issue features a review and audio clip of the prologue for the new play *Woman in White*, a visual clip of a new ballet production and a

competition to win VIP tickets to the *Communicate* art exhibition at the *Barbican Art Gallery* in London, to name a few. All of these cater for the consumer with high cultural capital, or one who wishes to invest in it to form their identity as a cultured individual.

The Month, as we have seen, can be viewed as an important part of identity formation to some consumers. *The Month* also follows the consumer culture trend to attach extrinsic values to commodities.

Identity seeking zeitgeist: I shop, therefore I am

Conclusion

From my research, *The Month* has proved to be a powerful consumer product in itself, as well as advertising and reviewing other products selected by the cultural intermediaries who form a large part of the production team. *The Month* is an important part of identity formation for its consumers and it follows the consumer culture trend of attaching extrinsic values to commodities.

Choosing textual analysis as my methodology for looking at *The Month* seemed the most appropriate to uncover examples to illustrate my points. Choosing textual analysis also proved beneficial to answer all research questions and produce an in depth study of *The Month*. Given the lack of co-operation by *The Month* team and *The Sunday Times* and being unable to gain access to any *The Month* users, other than myself, left textual analysis as the only viable methodology.

These points are also weaknesses of my dissertation. *The Month* team would have been able to provide me with demographic information about its users and so on. Interviewing a sample of *The Month* users would have given my interpretations increased validity. As it stands, any interpretations are my own and not based on fellow users views and ideas, nor those of *The Month* team. Another weakness of my dissertation is due to the fact there is no existing literature on *The Month*, that is to say, no intertexts. Therefore, I was applying ideas from elsewhere, theorists' own research on other products and brands then applying these ideas, arguments and theories to *The Month*.

Chapter Three offered a discussion of *The Month* in terms of its consumers and cultural intermediaries. The main emphasis of this chapter was to argue how *The Month* team are cultural intermediaries. Using many different writers explanations of what cultural intermediaries are, I argued this point in depth. *The Month* is argued to be selling luxury goods and sorting them into commodity hierarchies. Using Baudrillard's (1998) idea that consumption is motivated by the search for happiness, I discovered how *The Month* offers a consumer this emotion. I argued how *The Month* can be used to window-shop. Finally, in this chapter I expressed what types of consumers use *The Month* by using the ideas of Bowlby (1993) and Bauman (1998). The conclusion was that *The Month* consumers are both seduced and repressed with an over riding romantic consumer mindset.

Chapter Four looked specifically at the fact *The Month* is active in attaching extrinsic values to the products it advertises and how it is creating commodity fetishism. These were looked at with close relation to the idea of, *I shop, therefore I am*, identity expression and formation via consumption. I argued that *The Month* is a TV guide, events planner, gig guide and so on all in one. I discussed youth consumption and the way *The Month* targets this consumer demographic. Branding and advertising were discussed and applied to *The Month's* use of logo and sponsorship. The conclusion was that *The Month* is a very useful device for art-culture advertising and purchase opportunities.