The “Jack Wills Brigade”: Brands, Embodiment and Class Identities in Higher Education.’

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Introduction

*Jack Wills creates fabulously British clothes for the university crowd. Drawing inspiration from Britain's rich history and culture, juxtaposed with a heavy dose of the hedonistic university lifestyle, we create authentic and relevant clothing for today*.

Whilst this is not a piece about Jack Wills, the clothing brand, nor a deconstruction of student fashions or brands per se; this slogan prefaces a chapter focusing on the complex interplay of sociocultural codes negotiated in the ways in which student (class) identities are performed and (re)constructed in their everyday university experiences. The role of clothing and the symbolic associations in the embodiment of different brands and manners of dressing presents a noteworthy means of distinction and differentiation in and between different students. The significance of the terms used in the Jack Wills slogan above such as the ‘hedonistic university lifestyle’ of ‘the [British] university crowd’ and the reference to authenticity is remarkable as these very notions factor in the ways many students differentiate between ideas of studenthood and relationships to the identity category ‘student’. In this chapter I focus on the way in which the British ‘university crowd’ is interpreted, what signifiers are used as codes and how ultimately subtle and yet powerful distinctions around clothing denote who stands inside or outside of that crowd; who get its right and what it feels like to get it wrong. As such I highlight some of the ways in which differential access to capital affects and restricts means of claiming the identity ‘student’; what the conditions of membership to studenthood involve and how the formation of and relationship to the identity of ‘student’ is negotiated in and through student experiences in the everyday.

This chapter highlights the subtleties of the ‘fit and misfit’ (Bradley, 2012); the experiences of ‘fitting in’ and ‘standing out’ (see Reay et al, 2010); and the complex negotiations of class identities within higher education. The research analyses

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1 See: [https://www.carnaby.co.uk/store/jack-wills](https://www.carnaby.co.uk/store/jack-wills) [Accessed February 2016]
emphasises the visual and sociocultural means of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) in the everyday experiences of undergraduates in two English universities. As such this research joins a significant body of work focusing on undergraduate student experience (see Wakeling this volume for a discussion of post-graduate student identities) most of which has concentrated particularly on experiences of (dis)advantage and/or exclusion within and between different higher education institutions (HEIs) (Archer et al., 2003; Bathmaker et al, 2013 Bradley & Ingram, 2012; Clayton et al., 2009; Crozier et al., 2008; Greenbank, 2007; Longden, 2004; Taylor & Scurry, 2011; Reay et al., 2009; 2010; Redmond, 2006; Waller, 2006). The research analyses and context in which the study discussed here took place continues to bear relevance and provoke considerations in an educational landscape wherein the proliferations of foci on ‘student experience’ arguably risks ongoing (mis)recognition of the persistence and pervasiveness of class in the lives of university students; and differential access to the resources needed for success and accrual of capital (Abrahams & Ingram, 2013; Bathmaker et al., 2013). By critically examining government rhetoric we can begin to understand how class is muted and becomes something of an unspeakable term – the ‘c’ word (Sveinsson, 2009). The undergraduate students’ experience and identities explored in this chapter also further highlight a reluctance to explicitly discuss or name class. Instead other class terms and use of sociocultural codes or markers to make distinctions with different ‘types’ of students offer insights into the way in which class works in Higher Education (HE).

**Research context and Methodology**

As Diane Reay’s work (2001: 333) emphasises, ‘working class relationships to education cannot be understood in isolation from middle-class subjectivities’ and ‘unconscious aspects of class that implicate both middle-class and working-class subjectivities’ are important also to this research, which seeks to problematise the normativity of middle-class students and their experiences (Gillies, 2005: 837). This research is concerned with exploring how privilege is maintained and challenged, and how privileged identities are performed, recognised, upheld and/or challenged; and it holds such discussions in contrast to the discourses of meritocracy surrounding HE. Furthermore, as Archer (2003: 14) argues, ‘any analysis of class inequalities in relation to higher education must take into account not only people’s shifting class identities but also the role of the educational institution itself in creating and perpetuating class inequalities’. This chapter draws on qualitative data from an ESRC-funded PhD
research study conducted using 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 2 focus groups involving predominantly White, British undergraduate students (1 identified as British-Chinese) mixed gendered sample (16 female, 11 male) sample, which took place between 2009-2010. This study was conducted with self-identified working- and middle-class students from two closely situated universities of differing status, to explore a variety of experiential factors of their everyday practices of university life. The two institutions involved included one Russell group and one post-1992 institution situated in the north of England. Although the area is quite distinctive in terms of its history, the names of the institutions are referred to simply as OLD and NEW throughout this chapter on the basis that the analyses could be equally valid to any English university at the time, no less the many examples of university cities encompassing similar examples of institutional pairings (see for example the Paired Peers project, including the chapter by Bradley and Waller in this volume, and Bathmaker et al forthcoming).

The focus on appearance and branded clothing in this chapter is just one aspect of embodiment repeatedly highlighted throughout the research as markers of distinction and signs of student identity and belonging in their various forms (for other examples see: Addison & Mountford, 2015; Mountford, 2014). As part of this analyses, attention to ‘the body’ requires understanding of the ways in which the body provides the means to bridge individual and social dimensions (Shilling, 2007: 3) which ‘erupts onto the surface…(manifested via forms of marking, decoration and dress)…enabling individuals to recognise others as participants in a common culture’ (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]: 125) – or culturally different. Archer et al (2007:219), in their study on practices of taste and style in the educational field, argue that ‘young people seek to generate worth and value through their investments in style’. Whilst the subjects of their research are working-class and of school age, their work is similar to this aspect of the research in the recognition that the practice of style and use of particular brands within the educational field, is one way in which class identities are performed. Further, it follows that certain practices necessarily implicate exclusions that are present in this research context also.

Bourdieu’s work and his concept of habitus as embodiment – the social incorporated into the body, ‘of power as subtly inculcated through the body’ (Adkins,

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2 The Russell Group was formed in 1994 with 17 universities and currently includes 24 that are research-intensive and world-class institutions. Many of these institutions are closely situated to a post-1992 institution as well as those involved in this research study.

3 http://www.bristol.ac.uk/spais/research/paired-peers/about/, accessed October 2015
2004: 5) offers enormous potential for theorizing social class. For example, Moi (1991: 1019) praises Bourdieu’s ‘microtheory of social power’ for the ability to ‘link the humdrum detail of everyday life to a more general analysis of power’. That Bourdieu finds seemingly banal, everyday practices as analytically interesting is for Moi, a great advancement in the study of social life. Such championing of the everyday concerns and experiences as worthy areas of analysis is incredibly valuable in this research. Bourdieu’s work allows analysis of everyday life in which the process of class and performance of class identities occur and thus, allows study of the minutiae of everyday experiences that contribute to student life. One of the most compelling aspects of Bourdieu’s work, especially *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), was its focus on the middle classes; it is a work that takes as its central aim to explore the ways in which privilege is sustained and replicated across all areas of social life and thus the ways in which social inequality perpetuates. This aim is also very close to that of this research. Using Bourdieu’s work, or in Moi’s terms ‘appropriating Bourdieu’ therefore is especially useful, theoretically and conceptually, in research aimed at exploring the perpetuation of privilege and operations of class and class identities in higher education.

Bourdieu (1998) highlighted that class is ‘something to be done’ just as identities are. Talking to students and analysing their accounts of personal experiences, relationships and interactions with others and various student spaces and places, their motivations and expectations, choices and sense of value, alongside their personal circumstances, offers a way of seeing how class and class identities are continually ‘being done’. Whilst the academy is said to define and regulate what a student is (Morley, 1997), how such definitions are taken up, resisted or challenged is likely only to be enriched from the accounts of undergraduate students themselves. What is important here then are the often emotional and ‘moral aspects of the experience of class and the concerns that people have regarding their class position and how others view them’ (Sayer, 2005: 947). Although the way that power works through these positional views is such that ‘what gets to count as tasteful is simply that which is claimed as their own by middle-class people’ (Lawler, 2008: 126). Class judgements are interconnected with emotions, morality and taste and analysing the judgements people make in the everyday involves grasping the processes and the spaces within which normativity is established, via the making of class judgments.
There is a relative lack of sociological attention to middle-class ‘emotional responses to social class inequalities’ (Reay, 2005: 919) and thus research of this kind needs to be sensitive to the psycho-social and emotional dimensions of class, researching this with students from a variety of social backgrounds. Class is ‘experienced in multiple, divergent ways according to a range of factors’ (Woodin, 2005: 1014); it is as Kuhn (1995:117) says, not ‘just about the way you talk or dress … or how much money you make doing it...Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being’. Building on this notion, Reay (2005: 911) adds, in ‘contemporary British society social class is not only etched into our culture, it is still deeply etched into our psyches, despite class awareness and class consciousness being seen as a “thing of the past”’. Class is not something that is always consciously considered in the everyday – it forms our unconscious as well as often being emotionally mediated. Therefore, although research participants may not actively and consciously construct their lives and opinions about others in class terms, it is possible to infer from their accounts of everyday HE experience, the way that class operates in HE. This chapter is an exploration of these nuanced operations of class in the everyday – through the naming and reframing of class in everyday colloquialisms and the means in which distinctions are visually (re)constructed. The way the students position themselves against others and experience their everyday encounters with university life provides insight into the implications of getting it right and getting it wrong.

*The ‘Jack Wills Brigade’, introducing the ‘rah’*

One of the most common ways in which participants talked about class and normative student identities was in relation to the figure of the ‘rah’. The circulation of the term ‘rah’ and its particular usages demonstrates some of the ways in which class ‘circulates socially while being unnamed’ (Lawler, 2008: 126); or rather in a sense, ‘renamed’. Very simply put, a ‘rah’ is a classifying term and signifies a status system. Its currency is largely pejorative as a term for a person or persons seen to be embodying a particular (young, white, upper-middle class) student identity and is implicit in the operation of class fractions and struggles to claim legitimacy within HE. The term ‘rah’ therefore becomes a blanket term for ‘posh people’ and all that they are imagined by working-class students to represent. The application and use of the term ‘rah’ is demonstrative of the culturally specific processes of boundary formation involved in class distinctions and moreover, is demonstrative of the displacement and individualisation
of distinction making. A meritocratic discourse operates in this context to position students as having achieved their (HE/class) status via hard work; an imperative of individualistic subjectivities to claim entitlement via having achieved such positions and not merely having them bestowed upon them. As such, the naming of the ‘rah’ and the position taking, in relation to these figures, is demonstrative of performative statements that suggest what student normativity consists of. In many interesting ways discourses of meritocracy that circulate in (higher) education run through the many expressions of the figure of the ‘rah’ and within these spaces notions of taste and authenticity in/of identity performance are highlighted in the everyday distinctions between student social groups and what studenthood entails.

The students in the research discuss the ‘rah’ in relation to a number of areas of student life including residential and leisure spaces, studying and finance, making friends and ‘fitting in’ and most frequently, in the naming and making of distinctions between students and the notion of ‘studenthood’ in the everyday of ‘student experience’. The term ‘rah’ was used interestingly as a means to differentiate between the two institutions used in this research with OLD University being ‘more rah’ or having proportionally lots more ‘rahs’ according to the vast majority of students in the research but in particular those from NEW University. See the chapter by Cheeseman in this volume for a further discussion of this phenomenon. The term ‘rah’, was also often alluded with the term ‘typical student’, particularly with local students who considered their relational atypical student status often ‘between the two worlds’ (Holdsworth, 2009: 235) of the ‘local’ and the ‘university’. Despite some differentiation over the proportion of ‘rahs’ in different university populations and some minor variations of what constituted a ‘rah’ identity; it was apparent that this identity was one that was conferred rather than claimed and was often used a blanket term for a number of (distasteful) sociocultural factors.

The questions posed to the undergraduate students centred on asking them to identify any common student ‘looks’; and what people tended to wear and how they dressed for university. Participants almost always immediately involved identifying ‘rahs’ and the clothing brands they wore.

....so you’ve got your, like, ‘Rahs’ if you like; so you’ve kind of got like the Jack Wills brigade who all wear the same kind of tracksuit bottoms and stuff…

(Tim⁴, 21, middle-class, OLD University)

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⁴ All names used throughout are pseudonyms
There is like, in a way, a student ‘look’ but it’s very like stereotypical of like- private school people... you can tell ‘rahs’ a mile off...(laughs) it’s like, they all wear like Jack Wills and like Abercrombie and Fitch and stuff like that, - which I really like personally. So, like before I came here I was like, you know – but they wear it like, religiously! They have like, they’re quite lazy in the way they dress like, they’ll have like tracksuits with Ugg boots – you know, like Jack Wills tracksuit with like a hoody or something ...... and they do genuinely have an impression that they’re better than you and that’s just like, that’s just from, you know, like, seeing them. And you know, I speak to a few of them and they are – like, they’re still kind of, you know, high and mighty and up themselves ...... cause they’re all really rich you know, ‘Rahs’, and they have a tracksuit on with like, big Prada earrings and like [a] Chanel bag or … but like, I think they’re doing it as a statement – you know like wearing what they wear as a statement with like, you know, like they’re doing it a bit subtly like I think it’s a bit conscious really... they think they look cool...

(Faye, 18, middle-class, OLD University)

Several noteworthy themes appear in Faye’s expression of a particular ‘university crowd’ here and are in common with others that run through many of the students who took part in this research, albeit in different and interesting ways. The ‘rah’ descriptions entail signifiers of wealth such as private schooling and (often designer or luxury) branded clothing; particular accents and ways of talking (usually distinctive received pronunciation or ‘Queen’s English’); cultural expressions and codes including (bad) manners; superiority; and ostentatious behavior and spending. Tim’s comments confirm that ‘Jack Wills’ in particular has become something of a ‘rah’ emblem, certainly in OLD University at least. The brands themselves, their noticeable display and knowledge of their material value are frequently commented on when ‘rahs’ are being discussed. In the naming of branded clothing as distinctive to a ‘type’ of student, the symbolic and material associations with particular branded items intersect and mark out sociocultural codes and distinction. Furthermore, in Faye’s dialogue and with Tim’s (and many others) the suggestion that Jack Wills is ‘all they wear’ is significant to the extent that this portrays a sense of bad taste, but more so deliberateness and pretention, an outward performance, is being constructed. The comment that Faye makes regarding being ‘lazy in the way they dress’ has further
significance; the typical attire referred to is lounge-wear and leisure-wear; yet these items are often juxtaposed with visible luxury designer accessories conventionally out of place in leisure/lounge-wear occasions. That the ostentatious display of expensive branded goods and leisure wear coupled with a messy and unkempt appearance conveys a particular type of studenthood is interesting; interpreted by research participants as depicting a sense of contrived nonchalance, part of the ‘hedonistic lifestyle’ they lead rather than the studious approach of meritocratic success. As Charys explains below

…… you always see them outside the library like smoking and just acting cool … just really, really scruffy like student-like - trying to live up to some sort of expectation of what a student should be like - and they go to like lectures in their pyjama bottoms and…… like ’oh I’ve been up all night like partying’ - that kind of impression they wanna give - so they’re standing outside the library and like trying to give the impression of ‘oh I’ve just rolled out of bed’ but you can tell that they’ve spent probably quite a lot of time getting like that.

(Charys, 21, working-middle class, OLD University)

The sense of inauthenticity was also prominent in dialogues wherein the material value of this particular look was embedded in the comments about the pretentiousness of the ‘rah’; in these dialogues the pretension was more focused towards the notion of a ‘penniless student’ (with several uses of the word ‘tramp’) but made inauthentic by the visual, branded displays to subvert this association.

……what it seems to me is that someone who looks like a tramp but has got money to look like that! (laughs)

(Siobhan, 18, working-class, OLD University)

It just seems to be the students who are more funded by the parents maybe so obviously like if you’re getting the government grants and stuff it’s like – it works out like six grand a year or something like that and with six grand a year you can’t really afford to buy brands like Jack Wills which is like £90 for a t-shirt, so it seems to be more like the richer students generally who get that kind of look.
What Nadine and Siobhan highlight here is a tendency for some participants to comment on the material affordability of this look but it is deemed inauthentic because they are, as in Charys’ words, ‘trying to live up to some sort of expectation of what a student should be like’. The repeated mention of ‘tramp’ in many descriptions is significant because this goes beyond the standard limits of leisure-wear; the affordability of the brands the messiness hits on another issue of affordability in the sense of what is deemed appropriate social attire and the notion of affordability in terms of the judgements of others. The idea of maintaining respectability visually, through appearance, has historical gendered and classed legacies, whereby cleanliness and tidiness are central. The look and appearance of the students being discussed, offend such cultural norms of respectability as in Skeggs’ (1997) analysis of working-class women’s ‘respectability’ but in an important departure from the subjects of Skeggs’ (1997) research, these (‘rah’/’typical’) students are able to ‘convert their competencies into a form of authority, into symbolic capital’ and increase their cultural capital beyond the local level, although their performances are field/context specific. The performance is (penniless/typical) ‘student’; as (middle-class) students within higher education; judgements of them as tramps, rather than ‘penniless students’ will not stick.

The adoption of this ‘look’ of contrived nonchalance and hedonism and the ‘penniless student’ is interpreted as a temporary and purposeful measure, which they can afford to change and adapt at their will; an inauthentic depiction of what a ‘student’ is imagined to be. Such experimentation is part of what Lury (1998:1-2) terms ‘prosthetic culture’, whereupon individuals are engaged in ‘strategic-decision making’ that have implications for ‘recognitions of belonging, collective identification and exclusion’. The ‘tendency towards experimentation’ is something that Lury suggests has become a social and cultural norm in Western societies and it certainly fits with the picture that has been drawn of the ‘typical students’ or ‘rahs’ identified by the research participants in this study. The concept of ‘mimesis’ is central to Lury’s argument, which is ‘to become and behave like something else’; it is a relation of ‘making oneself similar to the environment’ (Lury (1998: 5). In this culture, she further adds:
...the subject as individual passes beyond the mirror stage of self-knowledge, of reflection of self, into that of self-extension...The prosthesis – and it may be perceptual or mechanical – is what makes this self-extension possible. In adopting/adapting a prosthesis, the person creates (or is created by) a self-identity that is no longer defined by the edict ‘I think, therefore I am’; rather, he or she is constituted in the relation ‘I can, therefore I am’.

(Lury, 1998: 3)

By adopting the prosthesis then, the self-extension is achieved via appropriation of classed, cultural signifiers that can be dis-assembled and re-assembled at will. However, what is important to highlight here is the notion of ‘I can therefore I am’. It warrants posing the question of who ‘can’ and likewise who ‘cannot’. As the following section will show, who can prostheticise ‘student’ or perhaps, ‘rah’ or indeed a different ‘type’ of student is not always a straight-forward matter of choice. Rather the ability to ‘create’ this identity involves a complex negotiation of (classed) signifiers and capital.

The student ‘look’; getting it ‘right’ or ‘wrong’

The identity category of ‘student’ involves claiming and conferring membership and therefore a sense of belonging to the collective. However, different relationships to student normativity suggest such identification is problematic and often only attainable for certain classed actors. The branded clothing and particular unkempt style of wearing it is associated as an embodiment via prosthesis of ‘rah’, or ‘studenthood’ more broadly, as different degrees of taste or affordability restrict or give access to the means to construct a particular student identity. As Nadine says above, it is only the ‘richer students’ who have access to this look; only they can afford to buy the expensive, branded goods that make up the look. The issue of who is able to propertise/prostheticise the student look is clearly central to ‘recognitions of belonging, collective identification and exclusion’ (Lury, 1998: 1-2).

There appears to be a distinct preoccupation with authenticity of identity in the distinctions that the students make. This relates in part to the conceptualising of identity as being related to a true, inner self that structures Western notions of identity (Elias, 1994). What has also been highlighted, however, is the notion of authenticity
in terms of fashion and appearance – of wearing or assembling a look in such a way that performs a contrived performance, a ‘cynical performer’ (Goffman, 1959) seeking to pull the proverbial wool over our eyes. However, what has also surfaced from the research dialogues and the theoretical work undertaken by authors such as Skeggs (2004) and Chaney (2002), are strong suggestions that visual identities and fashions are being selectively adapted and meanings played around with in these HE contexts. Chaney’s (2002: 80) argument that ‘the languages of social life will be increasingly ironicised’ where the ‘semiotics of social identity...will be increasingly accepted as relative’ are appropriate here. This ‘ironic consciousness creates opportunities to subvert traditional associations’ (Chaney, 2002: 80) contributing to ongoing (re)constructions of (privileged) class identities:

…there is a process of extreme sensitivity to, and yet comparative distance to, stylistic norms in everyday life. Although fashionable codes are capable of infinite gradations and internal differentiations within any particular group, it has been assumed that the demands of fashionable conformity work to create some sort of uniform. The very attractiveness of the metaphor of uniform and its implied expectations of conformity should not, however, blind us to the way that the relativism of fashion both individualises as well as communalises.

(Chaney, 2002: 80)

The student ‘uniform’ relies on shared recognition or shared meanings of the value of particular signifiers. The ability to take on this uniform also relies on affordability, in the sense of the risk of being (mis)read, as well as being able to have the economic resources to invest and convert to cultural and symbolic competencies. As Faye indicated earlier, for some it is not the [Jack Wills] brand per se, but the association of ‘rahs’ with this brand within university and this style that changes ways of thinking about how students dress and perform their [class] identities. For example most students indicated a change in their ‘look’ since starting university:

…it’s weird because after a while you can’t really tell who’s who ‘cause people like start to imitate them and like wear the same kind of things to maybe like erm……update their social status...Kind of like – well no one would ever like put on the accent or like act the way they are, but like the dress definitely – they kind of like set the kind of standard of like, what
you should wear and what you shouldn’t wear really... I tend to shop in
gnicer places than I did before because erm everyone kind of sets a higher
standard over here than they did back home, do you know what I mean?
(laughs)...[students] conform to the style but don’t necessarily like copy,
they kind of like take their own take on that style........so it’s kind of like
you take your inspiration (laughs) from Rahs and then make it your own.

(Charys, 21, working-middle class, OLD University)

.....like the Canterbury tracksuit that they [wear]...Like, I’ve got one and
lots of people have and would just wear that to the gym and that’s like
considered like, even when its uni, like just the trousers or something and
like that’s considered to be....I dunno, fashionable I guess…but if you
were to turn up in like a tracksuit from Primark – or something – I don’t
think that would really have the same effect....

(Elspeth, 21, middle-class, NEW University)

Charys in particular here denotes a sense of the ‘chameleon habitus’ outlined by
Abrahams and Ingram (2013); the adaptation occurring between the working-class
home field and the middle class university field is one of the habitus negotiating new
cultural capital’, moving within social space. Elspeth mentions another brand here
that was frequently mentioned by NEW university students (as well as Jack Wills);
with both her and Charys speaking to the sense of adapting their style, being mindful
of the social status and effects of brands. That wearing Primark\(^5\) wouldn’t ‘have the
same effect’ is key in understanding who is able to take up this ‘student’ look and how
exclusions operate. In this sense, brands act as symbolic markers; whilst the meanings
accorded to them can be often locally constructed and understood, they can also be
‘manipulations of symbolic prestige in the judgements of significant others and as such
be continually drawing boundaries between what is and how it could be otherwise’
(Chaney, 2002: 82).

Even those who attempt to take on the student look may be at risk of getting it wrong
if they do not have access to the brands, or ‘symbolic markers’ that typify affiliation

\(^5\) A well-known high street brand that markets itself on providing low cost or affordable clothes and goods.
with the student community or indeed to mark out as ‘other’ and risk drawing associations of being a chav (or ‘charver’/ ‘charva’ in the north east of England – the disenfranchised white poor – see Nayak, 2003; Tyler, 2008), the wrong kind of working class, a stranger to the university environment. The price of the brand is clearly implicated in their value. High stocks of economic capital are converted to cultural capital; as Elspeth says, brands like Primark won’t have the same effect as the more acceptable student brands such as Jack Wills and Canterbury she herself refers to. The latter brands are laden with symbolic prestige. Getting this ‘right’, she implies is part of student identity. Interestingly, Colin provides an example of an experience he has of wearing the ‘wrong’ brand:

...two days ago in university I decided to wear tracksuit bottoms...they’re just ‘Adidas’ ones with stripes down the side and the instant reaction I got when I walked in the class – well first of all, it’s not like me to dress like that...I usually dress quite smartly erm just because of my part-time job normally. But erm, it was like, ‘Colin, what are you doing, you look like a charva?!’; ‘cause I was speaking to Mandy and John about it and I was like, ‘Hold on; all the other boys on campus wear tracksuit bottoms, yet do they look like charvas? No. So do I look like a charva?’, and they were like, ‘Well, yeah, you do’...it made me think because it’s not Canterbury then maybe yeah or Kryki or something like that (it’s another sports brand that they wear); could [it] be that or......? ...It had me thinking like, is it me?! Like, do they know that I’m from like a rougher background and it makes them associate something or, I dunno, but it made me think...

(Colin, 22, working-class, NEW University)

The branding differentiation between a pair of seemingly similar items of clothing (tracksuit bottoms; leisure-wear) are interpreted very differently and the class associations between the ‘Adidas’ brand and the ‘Canterbury’ or ‘Kryki’ are made abundantly clear. On the day that Colin hasn’t dressed for work and has ‘dressed down’ in more of a relaxed leisure (one may say ‘student’) style, his performance is denigrated with the association of ‘charva’ (or ‘charver’, ‘chav’) rather than as ‘student’. He gets the ‘student look’ wrong, seemingly marked out via clothing brands. His misrecognition of the significance of brands is part of the way that exclusion works. Student fashion here then, provides a ‘means of affiliation that differentiates those who do recognise the prestigious object from those who do not’ (Chaney, 2002:
Different brands work as prestigious objects in the two institutions, with Canterbury and Kryki being more prevalent in NEW and Jack Wills in OLD. However, Colin also includes a point that needs further consideration. He ponders whether their judgement of him is sanctioned by their knowledge of his having come from a ‘rougher’ background. It is not that the prestige awarded to different brands exists independently of the person, but that the association of the brand and the wearer work in a combinatory form and are inherently complex and dynamic. The significance of the brand is relative to the wearer and the context and thus is part of the complex negotiation around meaning involved and visual identities. Colin’s use of ‘Adidas’ leisure clothing is a cultural capital he employs in his student attire but it is not symbolically recognised as student and is instead read as classed; as ‘chav’ in the sub-field of HE. What is of further significance in the ‘dressing down’ of the student look is captured here in Colin’s normal manner of dress being dictated by his work commitments. Colin worked long and frequent hours in a shop (admitting to often full-time hours of over 40 hours per week), which required him to ‘look smart’ and wear black trousers. Whilst perhaps not considered excessively ‘smart’, the contrasting ‘dressing down’ of wearing sports wear in a seemingly ‘wrong’ brand here is compelling.

The conditions under which different students experience their time studying at university enable and restrict their access to the resource of ‘choice’ to perform student identity visually, in the ways discussed above. Undertaking paid employment during term-time, has the effect of exclusion from taking up this student ‘look’, as dressing so ‘shoddily’ (Craig) or like a ‘tramp’ (Siobhan) is incompatible with the required standards of dress for most workplaces. Five of the students worked part-time on a regular basis (all working-class students) said that their choice of attire for university was influenced by their need to work before/after being in university. Like Colin, for most this meant at least wearing black trousers or skirts that could be easily adapted to suit working environments such as various retail outlets and offices. The ‘[e]xclusionary processes’ operating in HE that Reay (2007: 196) states involves, ‘far more working-class than middle class students talking about undertaking paid employment in both term time and the vacations’, which in this context also suggest this is also experienced as potentially limiting in terms of freedom of clothing choice.

The take-up of paid employment during term-time then, suggests that far more working-class students are excluded from being able to take up this student ‘look’ and thus the visual, symbolic associations of this ‘student’ identity. Often students are materially constrained both through the necessity to work alongside studying to
finance themselves and through their lack of access to economic capital needed to convert to cultural capital, via embodiment of the student look.

Summary: student fashions and identities

The visual aspects of identity discussed in this chapter present fascinating distinctions between the students in this research and point to complex everyday experiences of studenthood and claims to student identity. As Chaney (2002: 81) states:

…concern with fashion for everyday life lies in the opportunities it provides for more complex vocabularies of social identity…fashion is better understood as semiotics of inclusion and affiliation that has provided the basis for new modes of social grouping called lifestyles (Chaney 1996)….If lifestyles are concerned with the representation of identity then a theme of dramatisation of the self should not be puzzling.

A number of ways in which student fashions or ‘looks’ were discussed by the participants involved referencing ‘rahs’; a conferred identity for seemingly easily recognisable (upper-middle class) students often referred to as a sub-group of the student population. Through each of the dialogues about visual identity, there are examples of the ongoing conversion of economic capital into cultural and symbolic capital; the ‘rah’ display is certainly only affordable to wealthy students and yet there exists a complex struggle over the legitimacy of these student looks and the particular capitals involved in everyday exchanges. Much of the data refers to the figure of the ‘rah’ and relates to the different interpretations of the ‘look’ they are seen to embody; prostheticising and perhaps ironicising aspects of what they assume a student ‘should be’, because they can. This access to ‘others’ culture as a resource in their own making’, according to Skeggs (2004: 177) is ‘central to how the middle-class is formed’ and within these relationships of entitlement and exclusion, ‘new forms of exploitation are shaped’.

Whilst the image and representations of ‘rahs’ were repeatedly denigrated, the brands and styles are also posited as being extremely influential, creating trends that are imitated by other students. This suggests that there are complex negotiations of meaning circulating whereby the style, the brand, and the (classed) body are implicated in the making of distinctions. Further, whilst it is not

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6 Emphasis in the original.
possible to provide an analysis of the motivations behind the wearing of some of the widely named brands in the research dialogues (the Jack Wills branding prefacing this chapter may simply be coincidental and is one of many highlighted), this brief analysis highlights the significance of these particular brands in everyday identity performances of ‘student’. The perceived ‘cynical performers’ purposefully styling ‘student’ highlight meritocratic understandings of studenthood; however, access to the propertising of a student look (in various degrees of exaggeration) is not an option available to all. Using brands in practices of style and identity performances, raises issues of equity within the student experience; the exclusivity of particular brands and the material investments required to participate in these performances, highlight ways in which power and privilege operate to exclude those more restricted financially. These visual markers of belonging to sub-groups or to the category ‘student’ are part of the way that class works in HE and through which power and privilege operate in the everyday, seemingly banal aspects of student experience.

Reference list


