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Sex sells - or does it? Responses to the construction of youth identities in print advertisements

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Youth Culture in South Africa

Youth culture has become an increasing area of interest amongst educators and researchers. This is because youth consumer culture is having a considerable influence on youth identities that are performed in various contexts. In a multicultural and diverse society like South Africa, students come into schools with different identities. Ten years of South African democracy have paved the way for new youth cultures. Nuttall (2005) contends that the youth culture that is developing in Johannesburg is influenced by consumption. Research done by marketers reveals that the current youth market is more dynamic than ever before and that an understanding of youth is crucial for marketers. From both a consumer culture perspective and an educational perspective, youth culture is of increasing interest.

The term 'youth' is debatable in terms of who it is referring to as well as what it characterizes. For example, the UCT Unilever Institute (2003: 106) defines youth as the years between 18 and 24, when youth determine much of their personal style and brand preferences. Heaven and Tubridy (2005) state that for those living in present-day Western cultures, the term 'youth' refers to persons who are no longer children but not yet adults. I think this is how the term is loosely translated by the majority of people in South Africa. Heaven and Tubridy (2005) state that, strictly speaking, youth refers to a person from the time of their early teens until a point between the age of 15 and 21, after which time the person is legally an adult.

For the purpose of this study, I will define youth as the period between 15 years and 21 years. My interest in youth is in the attributes that distinguish youth from other groups. These qualities are the specific cultural pursuits such as consumption of cultural phenomena, styles of behaviour and dress codes. These factors have led me to engage in research about the role played by fashion brands in shaping youth culture.

Brands are very influential in shaping how young people are defined by others and in how they see themselves (Klein, 1999; Farber, 2002). Davidson (1992: 23) defines brands as 'products with something extra - that extra is called the added value'. Davidson argues that advertising integrates the characteristics of a product with something else – symbols, meanings, images, feelings - to create a brand that is loved and wanted. Successful products are not just products but are brands, and if they are brands, it means that they are a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, or an idea (Davidson, 1992: 23).

Present day youth in Johannesburg seem to be passionate about brands (Williams, 2004). Post -apartheid South Africa has opened the gates to heightened consumption, as the country's reintegration into the world has meant access to new brands. Young people adore local or global brands, such as Aca Joe, Hip Hop, Billabong, Loxion Kulcha, Nike, Guess, Levi's and others. For example, the famous Love Life campaign about HIV/AIDS awareness for the young has adopted a branding strategy in order to reach its youth audience. Thus, there are several Love Life bill boards which are placed in strategic positions around the City. Farber (2002) notes that for the young people that she interviewed who were frequenting the Zone (an entertainment centre and bastion of youth activity at the Rosebank Mall in Johannesburg), labels and logos go hand in hand with lifestyle branding. Products that symbolize a certain lifestyle are part of popular culture. Her interviewees associated labels with social identity and status. For example, one of them said:

> When it comes to jeans, labels are very important to me. I would never buy Mr Price or Woolies jeans. Label jeans are status symbols and they define you. If you are wearing Levi's, Diesel or Calvin Klein, it just says something about you. But also, they are actually better products and they can last you for a very long time, (Farber, 2002: 50).

1.2 Youth Culture and Globalisation

Post-apartheid South African youth bears similarities to youth globally. Klein (1999) argues that labels are important in terms of self-identity among youth globally. Klein (1999) describes 'global teens' in terms of the logos with which they decorate themselves:

> It's the young people living in developed and semi-developed countries who are the great global hope. More than anything or anyone else, logo-decorated middle-class teenagers, intent on pouring themselves into a media-fabricated mould, have become globalization's most powerful symbols, (1999: 118-119).

Klein (1999) describes the consumption phenomenon among middle-class teenagers as it occurs in first world countries. It is interesting that in South Africa it is not just middle-class children who are fond of expensive brands, but working class youth who struggle to afford brands also buy them. As Nuttall points out, in South Africa consumption reflects the aspirations and imaginings of young people (Nuttall, 2004). The media play a role in shaping youth cultures and youth identities. Nuttall (2005: 3-4) defines youth culture as 'a continuum of youth-centered, multi-media forms and ideas that cut across sound, sartorial, visual and textual cultures to reveal complex and shifting identities'.

The youth culture that is found in Johanneburg is influenced by globalization. Hall (1992: 299) defines globalization as the processes operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities and organizations in new space-time combinations, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected. Globalization connects people living in different countries, through sharing certain things, especially the consumption of similar products and brands. Klein (1999) illustrates this by citing findings of the global teen demographics conducted in 1996 by the New York–based advertising agency named DMB&B's BrainWaves division:

> Despite different cultures, middle-class youth all over the world seem to live their lives as if in a parallel universe. They get up in the morning, and put on their Levi's and Nikes, grab their caps, backpacks, and Sony personal CD players, and head for school (1999: 119).

In my experience as a researcher, I have at times observed students listening to Ipods in the classroom when the teacher's attention has not been focused on them. During break times, students crowd around those who are playing music from cellphones or Ipods. Globalization feeds a youth culture that is based on consumption. In order to get young people to consume more brands, advertising is used through billboards, television, malls, streets, movies, print media and so on. The notion of 'taste' (see Dolby, 2000) also plays a role in defining individual identity. In an increasingly materialistic society such as Johannesburg, people are often defined by what they wear, consume and own. This makes a discussion of advertisements an interesting research topic because consumption relies on marketing communication.

1.3 Advertising

As has been mentioned, there is a predominance of advertisements in the media that young people are exposed to. This is because of the free market economy, which is based on the principle that each individual in the society is free to choose his or her own economic activity (Cronje et. al: 2004). This is typical of a capitalist state in which the manufacture of goods is superseded by branding. Advertisements tend to influence youth in the formation of a culture that is based, among other things, on consumption. This study seeks to find out how youth react to print advertisements.

Although advertisements share many similarities regardless of the media in which they appear, this research is concerned with magazine advertisements. Print advertisements are made up of various elements, including logos, images and words, as discussed in the next chapter. These elements provide analogies that are linked to the product being advertised. Shields (1994: 1) states that as a result:

> Adverts' pervasiveness has called forth popular and academic discourses about how these images are implicated in the on-going construction and maintenance of gender identities and social relationships between women and men.

Shields observes that the media construct gendered identities through advertising images. She is not alone in the investigation of gender and advertisements. Several scholars, e.g Goffman (1979), Schroeder and Borgerson (1998; 2005), Waters and Ellis (1996) Overland (2003), among others, have also analysed the nature of gendered representations in advertisements. Schroeder and Borgerson (2005: 15) point out that:

> Marketing representations remain embodied and embedded within a myriad of historical, cultural, and social situations, contexts, and discourses. At times this image creation draws upon …. representations of cultural difference, group identity, and geographic specificity.

This assertion would mean that for many people advertisements depict recognisable moments from society's ways of life. The question arises whether the advertisements reflect societies' 'realities' or hypothesized/ 'imagined' reality. It is one of the aims of the study to examine the relationship between audiences and the 'reality' presented by advertisements.

It is useful to investigate the maps of meaning that are depicted by advertisements and how these are interpreted by their audiences. Some studies, including the one that I conducted in 2003, are based on an interpretative textual analysis of advertisements with the intention of finding out techniques of appeal (e.g Ndlangamandla, 2003). The present study builds on this by attempting to find out the actual interpretation of advertisements by a youth audience. Audience research takes into consideration the interpretation of a group or groups of audiences. This is partly based on the assumption that advertisements are prescriptive and that the audience will agree or disagree with the message given by the advertisement's discourse. To echo this notion, Shields (1994) advocates that the

examination of the interplay between individual interpretive freedom (agency) and textual (structural) messages is necessary for the text/audience relationship to be understood.

Previous research has often emphasized that ‘ads make identities available to consumers as raw materials for identity construction’ (Elliot, 1997 quoted in Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005). Such an approach seems to imply that there is a ‘correct’ interpretation of the advertisements, and that this meaning flows from the advertisements to the consumer (Puntoni & Ritson, 2005). However, in this study I seek to investigate the notion that audiences construct meanings from the advertisements. Puntoni and Ritson (2005) argue that ‘the actual meaning of the advertising text is constructed by individual audience members who make meaning from the text in a way congruent with their own experiences and perspectives.’ Therefore, the interpretation of advertisements is likely to yield different opinions based on both background and socio-historical context of the readers.

This study will present my own interpretation of four print advertisements, using a social semiotic framework to deconstruct the advertisements and the types of interpretations that are given to the print advertisements by high school students in Johannesburg. I am going to use the terms ‘interpretation’, ‘perception’ and ‘responses’ for slightly different purposes than they are conventionally used. In this study, interpretation is basically about the reading, meaning, message and opinions that people get from analysing an advertisement, whereas perception is what people think about the advertisements and, lastly, response is a result of interpretations and perceptions of the advertisements. Responses refer to the reactions of people after reading an advertisement.

1.4 Aim of the Study

The aim of this research is to investigate the interpretation and the perception of print advertisements targeted at youth. The purpose of the research is to investigate how print media construct certain youth identities and how youth in turn construct their own meanings from them. This leads to matches and/ or mismatches between the identities constructed by the media and those constructed by the youth at whom the advertisements are targeted. In other words, target audiences interpret whatever identity is constructed in the advertisements in various or multiple ways.

1.5 Research Questions

In this study, I will show how youth identity is constructed in and through advertisements. I will also examine the nature of youth identities through the interpretations of advertisements that are made by the youth. The questions to be asked are:

1. What are the representations of youth identity found in selected print advertisements from two 'youth' magazines?
2. What do focus group interviews and survey questionnaires reveal about the interpretation and perceptions of these advertisements by youth?
    - What do youth think of the construction of youth identities in the advertisements?
    - To what extent are such interpretations implicated in the life worlds of learners?

In conclusion, there are several factors that make this enquiry worthwhile. Firstly, the research originates from the practice of critical reading of advertisements, which is common in critical literacy approaches to the language classroom (e.g. Lankshear, 1997). Moreover, Dolby (2001) writes that there is little scholarship that examines how youth

make meaning from media texts, and the ways in which they enact those meanings in their lives.

Secondly, advertisements represent a huge portion of popular culture. I raised a question in an earlier study (Ndlangamandla, 2003) as to whether advertisements construct youth culture or youth culture constructs advertisements. It was suggested that there is some kind of dialectical relationship between popular culture and advertisements. This presents a motivation to select advertisements for analysis for the present study, especially at a time when understanding youth popular culture has become very complex because of many factors, such as diversity and post-modernity. For this reason, this study will investigate the representations of youth identity in images of advertising.

Lastly, the purpose of the present study is to investigate youth readings of print media so that a perspective may be gained on youth culture as it impacts on learner identities in the school context. This differs from market research and traditional audience research, where the focus is on product use, product purchase, figures, audience demographics and so on.

1.6 Overview of the Research Report

I provide an outline of the research report below.

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

I discuss the theoretical terrain that underpins the study and further review the relevant literature that informed my social semiotic analysis of the texts as well as the interpretations made by the high school learners.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

I give an account of the research process undertaken, from textual analysis, survey questionnaires, and focus group interviews to thematic content analysis. There is also a

detailed description of the research contexts, encompassing the schools, the magazines and the research design.

Chapter Four: A Social Semiotic Reading of Print Advertisements

In this chapter, I first provide a summary of the social semiotic framework that I use to analyze four print advertisements. I then present an interpretative textual analysis of adverts from Soviet, Guess, Diesel and Levi's. My analysis reveals the different kinds of sex and sexuality that are depicted in the advertisements. It also shows how Levi's departs from this norm by portraying a more hybrid view of youth culture.

Chapter Five: Youth Readings of Print Advertisements

I begin this chapter with an overview of the survey responses gained from the learners I interviewed for each advertisement and build categories of acceptor, hedger and rejecter. I then explore some of the themes that were predominant in the interpretations of the advertisements by learners.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

I reiterate the main findings of the study and discuss how the media representations and interpretations of the students reflect the post-structuralist theorizing of identity. I also consider implications for teaching popular culture amongst 'the branded youth'.