

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This research is about perceptions of print advertisements by groups of young people. The print advertisements form a locus of popular cultural texts that are ‘read’ in educational circles and non educational circles. I have used a social semiotic approach to interpret the dominant representations in the advertisements. By drawing on CDA I have been able to describe how the advertisers use powerful vectors that express different levels and kinds of sexuality. My analysis of the advertisements is based on the fact that discourse is able to construct social reality and that discourse is constituted by social reality (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). By analysing discourse one is able to understand social identities. I use a post-structural notion of identity (Hall, 1992) in which identity is seen as embedded in representations (both verbal and visual) and is characterised as non fixed, non unitary, and fluid. As a result, this study has shown how representations of youth in print advertisements construct different identities and also how youth readings of the same advertisements reveal social realities, social identities and social experiences of the learners.

In this study, I first analysed the representations of youth identity of four fashion advertisements: Soviet, Guess, Diesel, and Levis. I then administered a survey questionnaire to the learners, seeking their opinions and feelings about the advertisements. Lastly, I followed up with group discussions in order to gain more insight into the issues that I had observed in the questionnaire.

The study has discussed interpretations of four advertisements for popular youth brands from two different audiences. I represent my interpretations of the advertisements and the learners’ interpretations of the advertisements below. My analysis of the adverts reveals various forms of sexual identities that are on offer in three of the brands: Soviet conveys a male penetrative sexual desire that is exemplified in the numerous vectors that intersect

at the crotch of the model; Guess shows a free-spirited feminine sexual self-indulgent identity that precludes men; Diesel represents a funky sexual identity where the man chases the woman. Unusually, the Levi's text adopts a different strategy, with the Hip - Hop identity on offer. My analysis also reveals that youth are involved in pleasurable, outdoor, music related situations in all of the adverts.

On the other hand, the responses from the learners reveal a myriad of interpretations which are discussed in Chapter Five. The sexualised identities that are on offer in three advertisements (Soviet, Guess and Diesel) evoked different responses. Many learners were of the opinion that 'the sex appeal' in advertisements has been over used and criticized it as no longer creative and original. They felt that such half-nude depictions of female models are disrespectful to their bodies and are degrading to them. Most of the female readers disliked the objectification of the female bodies in the advertisements. There were different degrees of 'resentment' attached to the texts. For instance, the Guess advertisement was disliked the most, followed by the Soviet and then the Diesel advertisement. It seems that the learners disliked the feminine sexualised self-indulgent pleasure (Guess), more than the heterosexual male sexual desire of the Soviet brand, and that the Diesel advertisement was a 'failure' because of the learners' difficulty in understanding the visual message alongside the verbal text 'erogenous zones'. The Levi's advertisement appealed to the majority of learners because of its affiliation to Hip Hop, but also excluded some learners, especially the whites and some females.

Some learners showed that they were fond of the brands but not necessarily the constructions of youth identity in the advertisements. This shows that the power of consumption and brand loyalty is enough to persuade the learners to profess love of the brand even if the image is 'rejected'.

Furthermore, learners' responses suggest that the advertisements construct social class, gender and racial identities. Misson (1994) discusses the way in which advertisements work through positioning the reader as a particular kind of person. Learners referred to the Levi's brand being associated with black boys who come from suburbs, and

‘American wanna bees’. The multiple interpretations of learners also reveal that in stylising the self, learners are divided between the local and the global. It seems that the local culture as shown in loxion kulcha exists side by side with global youth culture as shown in the Hip Hop identity depicted in Levi’s.

Implications for pedagogy

Although this study has not been based on action research and none of these advertisements have been taught in the classroom in a curriculum-oriented manner, there are important implications regarding the teaching of popular culture or media texts in the classroom, which are not necessarily limited to print advertisements. For instance, these texts are able to afford the learners opportunities to talk about their experiences and feelings without the dominance of teacher talk in the classroom (Buckingham, 1998). As Buckingham contends, the use of such texts in the classroom affords learners opportunities to share their worldviews, rather than being forced to listen exclusively to the teacher, and the use of such texts should not be divorced from the goals of teaching the English language and literature syllabus. Learners’ level of enthusiasm increases in relation to the discussion of popular culture texts because they read such texts for enjoyment.

In addition, advertisements should not only be explained in relation to manipulation and propaganda in line with the ‘so called’ rational goal of critical literacy (Janks, 2002 and Misson, 1994). Studies of pedagogy should also give students opportunities to decide whether they identify or do not identify with the construction of youth identity on offer, as well as to explain why they make particular readings. Such an approach allows learners like Vanessa to express openly her identification with the model in the Guess advertisements. Vanessa said that she would like to get the same reaction from people as the Guess model gets because of the way she is dressed. Because learners like Vanessa might not be comfortable expressing this in front of their teachers, teachers should devise strategies to create classroom situations conducive for learners to air their feelings and experiences. For example, the teacher might mix different strategies in relation to

teaching advertisements. He or she could allow learners to work with the texts on their own. This independent work might be taken as the youth readings of the adverts before the class as a whole proceeds to a systematic deconstruction of the adverts.

Although, some of the girls said that they would love to look like the Guess model when they are 'chilling' with their friends, other learners were critical of the half nudity shown in the advertisements. They criticized the advertisements for selling sex and for being preoccupied with people/sex rather than the actual products that they were purportedly selling. This shows that the conception of youth as a homogenous group, which is often defined through 'moral decay', 'partying', and the 'dropping standards of literacy' is incognisant of the diversity and heterogeneity of young people, as was witnessed in my research.

Youth interpretations of the advertisements show a level of sophistication that is often undermined by traditional approaches of teaching advertisements, in terms of which learners are positioned as vulnerable to the manipulation and propaganda in the adverts. Learners have the ability to show resistant reading (Thomas, 2004). They are not necessarily deceived by the advertisements. What was apparent in the study was that although the learners were aware of the strategies that were being used to appeal to consumers, they often still wanted to buy the brand for other reasons such as brand loyalty, the power of consumption, and portraying a public image to the opposite sex. For this reason, deconstruction should not take on the sole purpose of showing students that advertisements are exploitative, sexist, and so on, but teachers should strike a balance between what they call 'rational' critique and students' pleasure.

It was observed during the study that discussing advertisements creates an opportunity for many students to argue and defend their ideas, which is an important academic skill. Morrel (2002) argues that Hip Hop is the representative voice of urban youth. He claims that many rappers consider themselves educators and see at least a portion of their mission as raising the consciousness of their communities. This is in line with the goals of critical literacy (Lankshear, 1997). The influence of rap as a voice of resistance for

urban youth proliferates through artists who endeavour to bring an accurate yet critical depiction of the urban situation to a Hip-Hop generation (Morrel, 2002). Popular culture texts, such as advertisements, are able to stimulate debate about race, culture, gender, and so on in the classroom. Such topics are embedded in the critical outcomes of South African Outcomes Based Education.

Lastly, while the findings of this study are true of some urban young people, they may not be true of other places or of young people who have never seen Y magazine and SL magazine and who for that matter, might not be fond of these particular brands. However, these findings can also be applied to the analysis of other popular culture texts such as, films, newspapers, videos, music, and magazines.