Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the research process employed in order to analyse and explore youth interpretations of print advertisements targeted at them. The research design comprises qualitative research. Qualitative research is able to probe into attitudes and interpret experiences. According to Fontana and Frey (2000), qualitative research consists of interpretative, material practices that transform the world. These practices turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. Qualitative research is able to investigate people's opinions and beliefs.

I combine two methods in this research. These are a social semiotic approach to the analysis of advertisements, and a case study of youth responses to print advertisements. Knobel and Lankshear (1999:95) define a case study as an intensive study of a bounded, contemporary phenomenon, such as a classroom, a school, a social group and so on. Wallace (1998:161) argues that case studies are concerned with what is unique and singular. He states that the results of the case study will not be statistically generalizable to a larger population; however, case studies can be used as evidence to support theory, among other benefits. I conducted a case study with a sample of students in two suburban schools in Johannesburg. The aim of the study was to examine the construction of youth identities in print advertisements as well as the responses of the youth. I sought to reconstruct the youth identities constructed in the texts through my analysis of mediated representations of youth and their responses.

In answering my first research question: 'What are the interpretations of youth identity found in selected print advertisements from two 'youth' magazines?, I aimed to find out the representations of youth identities found in print advertisements of two magazines. I conducted a social semiotic analysis of advertisements for four fashion brands from SL and Y magazines (the visual analysis tools that were used are discussed fully in Chapter

Four). In order to answer the second question, 'What does the focus group interview and survey questionnaire reveal about the interpretations and perceptions of the advertisements by the youth?', I first distributed survey questionnaires, to Grade 11 learners in two schools. After analysing the learners' responses to the questionnaires, I conducted group interviews with the learners from both schools so that I could get further data on the issues and themes that were raised in the survey questionnaire. I give a detailed account of the research process below.

3.1 Data Description

The print advertisements came from two magazines; these were SL magazine and Y magazine. SL and Y magazines primarily target a youth audience but are largely racially divided. The SL magazine is targeted at white youth and the Y magazine is targeted at black youth. Both of the magazines fall under popular media among youth. Klopper (2005) states that: YMAG, which is linked to the youth radio station, Yfm, was founded in 1997. [Y magazine is subtitled YonakeYona, meaning roughly, 'That's how it is']. Klopper (2005) writes that the magazine has gone from strength to strength since it was first launched, in part by promoting itself as an 'unapologetic magazine for…thinking youth' (Masemola in Klopper, 2005).

SL or Student Life predominantly targets the young white student who has just come out of high school or is in the upper grades in high school. Some of the similarities between the two magazines are that most of the advertisements that are published in YMAG are also published in SL magazine. This shows that the advertisers have established some commonalities between black youth and white youth audiences. Such commonalities are revealed later in Chapter Five where I discuss youth responses to the advertisements. Nuttall (2004: 446) confirms these commonalities, arguing that:

> Y and SL speak of a still emerging crossover culture that often retains racially distinctive modes of self-styling, at least at the level of content. Y magazine in particular, focuses on crossover language of styles as important to a process of

cultural translatability, while in SL, crossover configurations are more apparent in terms of entertainment and advertising.

Both magazines target men and women. Nuttall writes that SL magazine was launched first for readers in Cape Town and Y Magazine came later as a 'counter attack' in Johannesburg. (SL remains Cape Town based while Y is Johannesburg based.)

The study was based on three types of data set. The first type was the actual print advertisements, the second type was the individual learner responses to the survey questionnaires, and the third type was the transcripts of the focus group discussions. Advertisements for four brands were selected for the study; namely: Guess, Soviet, Levi's and Diesel. These four brands were selected, firstly because they were identified as predominant over a period of three years spanning from 2002 to 2005. Secondly, my interaction with young people at the University of the Witwatersrand where I have tutored a course in Foundation in English to first-year students in the Faculty of Humanities suggests that these are the 'cool brands' among youth and young adults (youth as defined in the literature review). Moreover, the rationale for choosing brands for this enquiry was informed by Holland's view that:

> We're exposed to hundreds of brands every day in packaging, advertising, and on products, and we feel our lives become just a little more exciting when the brand's glamour rubs off on us (Holland, 1998: 3).

As discussed above, in different groups, adults and youth alike, labels have become adored by the youth within consumer culture, (see, Nuttal 2004 and Klein 1999 among others).

My study hypothesized that youth identities or youth consumer culture may be analyzed through interpreting particular brands and engaging with the reception of media texts. These brands are advertised in magazines, on television, billboards, radio, in newspapers, street art or graffiti and in shopping centres. Since I could not research many media at

once, I opted for print advertisements, as these were easier to work with in the schools than television advertisements or billboards would have been. In addition, anecdotal evidence in the classroom suggested that learners read many magazines. In another study previously conducted at one of the sites, Fairview High School, Hepburn (2002) established in her investigation of the reading practices of high school students that a large number of teenagers read magazines.

3.2 The Research Sites and Participants

The study was conducted at two suburban schools around Johannesburg - Fairview High School in the north of Johannesburg and Excel High School also in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Both schools are co-educational and multiracial schools. There is not a school in South Africa that still admits students on the basis of race after the 1994 democratic elections, but it is often found that a certain school may serve a particular race because of its geographical location and economic factors. This works in the sense that if people live or work in an area, they belong to a zone or a district within Johannesburg. Schools serve the different zones. It may happen that within a certain suburb, there are richer people living in the area and working class people who work in the area. Both are eligible for entrance to the local school. This would therefore influence the economic situation in the local school. For instance, schools that are located in townships are now referred to as Township schools. Schools that are found in the suburbs, such as Sandton and Houghton are known as ex-Model C schools. (In South Africa townships usually refer to places where African people live based on old apartheid terminology)

While carrying out this research, I was temporarily attached at Fairview High School and Excel High School for one day a week over five months, conducting an ethnographic study about language, identity and learning in desegregated schools. I was involved in non-participant observation of in-class interaction and out-of-class interaction of Grade 10 learners at both the schools. During this time, I became immersed in the cultural milieu of students' activities at the schools. This gave me a better understanding of the two institutions.

Fairview High School is a desegregated school that has a far larger percentage of black and Indian students than white students, according to educators at the school and from my observation. At the moment the school seems to have students that come from all over Johannesburg, according to the information that I received from the survey questionnaire. Students come from Buccleugh, Marlboro, Naturena, Midrand, Sandton, Gallor Manor, Sunninghill and Alexandra. However, there is a lot of talk in and out of the school that the school receives a strong influence of 'loxion kulcha' from Alexandra because of its close proximity, there also being a number of students from Alexandra. 'Loxion Kulcha' is a popular South African brand of fusion clothing. Bogatsu (2002) claims that Loxion is derived from the word location, a synonym for township or ghetto; kulca is the Hip Hop inflected spelling of 'culture'. She states that the term 'asserts and celebrates the notion of township life and the social environment of black experience in South Africa', and that the label was started in 1998 by Wandi (Nzimande) and Sechaba (Mogale). This brand of youth culture is found in Johannesburg amongst youth.

Fairview offers Grade 8 to Grade 12 classes. Learners write their Matric exams in Grade 12. The language policy of Fairview is that English is the first language of the school, and it is also the language of teaching and learning, while Zulu and Afrikaans are second/additional languages. Discipline in the school is not too strict. Although, the school purports to be one of the best schools in academic performance, it cannot boast to be at the top. The atmosphere in the school is relaxed. Students express that they love the school because of its friendly atmosphere and academic record but they complain that there is a lack of discipline in the school. For instance, time management is not as strict as it is at Excel High School. Students spend a lot of time walking and talking in the change-over periods. However, this atmosphere does seem to allow the students to express their identities in the school with less 'surveillance' from the authorities.

Excel High School is also situated in the northern suburbs in Johannesburg and has over a thousand students. It is a co-educational and multiracial school. There seem to be more black learners in the lower grades than in the upper grades. For instance, in the Grade 11

and Grade 12 classes there is a higher population of white students. The school is notable for its high academic achievements. Both students and teachers at the school constantly refer to the standard of education at the school as being superior to that of other schools. English is used as the language of teaching and learning and it is taught as a first language. Other languages such as Zulu and Afrikaans, are also offered as second/ additional languages. On the basis of the ethnographic study that I conducted at the school, I was able to establish that the school ethos seems to place a high premium on academic success and discipline. This is found in the school's atmosphere, which I observed through the dedicated teachers, and classroom discipline that prevails.

Students who attend school at Excel High School come from a range of places, such as Park Town, Park View, Greenside, Craighall, Randburg, Sandton and Emmarentia. There are probably fewer students who come from townships attending Excel High School than there are in Fairview High School. In my sample most of the students came from suburbs all over Johannesburg. There were two students from townships in Excel High School and three students from townships in Fairview High School.

For the purpose of this research, I chose 28 Grade 11 learners from each school for my samples. The age range of the learners in both schools was between 15 years and 17 years. There was a mixture of races in both the samples, such as blacks, Indians and whites. There were also both boys and girls among the respondents. In total there were 22 boys and 33 girls, 15 white, eight Indian, 23 blacks, six coloured, one Malaysian, one caucasian. Interestingly, all of the learners disclosed their race but not all of them mentioned their names. The following table summarises the gender and race categorisation of the research participants:

Gender:

Female	Male
32	22

Race:

White	Black	Malaysian	Caucasian	Coloured	Black African	Other	Indian
15	21	1	1	6	2	1	7

In my study, I was also aware of the limitations of the sample size. For example, the sample is not representative of all youth in South Africa. It was not possible to conduct the study in every school. Further studies could be conducted in other provinces with a larger sample involving diverse backgrounds. I used opportunistic sampling to select the research subjects. The problem with this sample is that there was no conscious selection of race (such as black and white), gender, and social class. Instead, participants of the research were drawn from those who belonged to a Grade 11 class from Fairview High School and Excel High School.

In conducting the survey questionnaire, I distributed each of the four adverts from the chosen brands, Levi's, Soviet, Guess and Diesel to about seven learners at a time. This meant that in Excel High School, seven learners responded to each of the four advertisements. The process was repeated in Fairview High School. The criteria for the selection of who should respond to what advertisement were based on the classroom seating arrangement and the bank of advertisements that was available at the time. Since I negotiated with the English class teacher to use an English class, the survey questionnaires were administered during class time.

Then, I conducted focus-group discussions in the schools as a follow up to administering the questionnaires. The purpose of the focus groups was to further explore with learners the issues raised by the questionnaires. I managed to have one whole-class discussion at Fairview High School consisting of the 28 learners from my original survey questionnaire sample, and one focus group of seven learners (six girls and one boy, five of them black and two coloured). In Excel High School, I conducted one focus group

discussion with six learners (four of them were black boys and two of them were white girls).

In order to conduct the focus-group interviews, I invited students to come for the discussions during break times or after school. In Fairview High School, I set up a discussion during break time. Initially, no students turned up but when I set up another one using a more participatory approach, which involved the learners, the class teacher and me, seven of them came. Likewise, my first group interview at Excel High School which was to be after school, was a non-starter. I persisted with the help of the class teacher, until I managed to get six learners who were willing to come after school. These focus-group discussions were based on a self-selected sample because I invited any learner from those who had completed the survey questionnaire.

3.3 Research Instruments

(a) Social semiotics

I used social semiotics to analyse the four print advertisements. There is a full discussion of the visual analysis tools in the next chapter (Chapter Four). However, there are general weaknesses in an interpretative textual analysis of this nature that I would like to highlight here. It is usually the case that images are open to various interpretations. The viewer must construct meanings from the text through the act of interpretation. Ritson and Elliot (1999:267) assert that 'although the text itself offers some guidance in structuring the reader's interpretation, all texts are to some degree open or polysemic in their interpretative scope'. The advertising text 'admits a range of possible alternatives' to the advertising audience according to Myers (in Ritson & Elliot 1999: 266). Therefore, the interpretations (both mine and the learners) cannot be described as objective and universal. Instead, there were multiple readings of the texts.

(b) Survey questionnaire

The research also used a set of individual survey questionnaires (see Appendix A), and focus-group interviews (see Appendix B) to collect opinions on the advertisements for four fashion brands. Questionnaires are useful because they are able to gather opinions from a larger number of people at the same time within a relatively short space of time, unlike one-on-one interviews. They are also ideal because they are standardized. This means that every respondent responds to the same questions in the same order.

(c) Focus groups

The survey questionnaires were followed by focus-group discussions. I read through all the responses that were in the survey questionnaires and identified common themes/issues and trends from the interpretations made by the learners. I then designed questions to use for the focus group discussions. These questions were based on the dominant issues that I had identified. The questions were meant to probe the learners and to get the learners' opinion further to speak about things that were not clear. The two questions below illustrate how I shaped questions in relation to the questionnaire. The first question uses the learners' responses to the Levi's advertisement, while the second draws on a theme that emerged across the responses to the four advertisements.

1. What makes you think that the Levi's advertisement would appeal to black guys, American wanna be's and Hip Hop fans? Somebody said it is not for Alexandra, do you know where such people are found?
2. Most of you said that some of the brands are selling sex or are preoccupied with the people and not selling the product, which they are supposed to do. Where does one draw a line between an advertisement which sells the product and one which does not? In your opinion what is the best way of advertising such products?

I had a total of 13 questions. The questions were used in an unstructured way during the focus-group discussions. Slater (1998: 131) states that a focus group is defined as an in-

depth interview with a group instead of with individuals. Focus-group interviews are usually used in market research, where the purpose is to gather consumer opinion(s) on product characteristics, advertising themes or service delivery (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 651). Finch and Lewis (2003) state that participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study, the language they use, and the emphasis they give, and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display. Furthermore, as Bloor points out 'it reflects the social construction – normative influences, collective as well as individual self-identity, shared meanings – that are an important part of the way in which we perceive, experience and understand the world around us' (in Finch & Lewis 2003: 172). Focus groups are supposedly better than one-on-one interviews because they efface the role of the interviewer/researcher and simulate naturalistic conversation. In this research, focus groups were used in order to get in-depth interpretations of advertisements.

A limitation of the group interviews is that there was group domination by a few individuals who were self opinionated, particularly in the whole-class discussion of 28 learners. I noticed that less than ten learners participated in the discussion. Thus, the more reticent learners were sidelined by the vocal members of the group. However, this problem was anticipated and overcome by the questionnaire that was circulated to all the research participants prior to the focus-group discussions. The advantage of combining the two research instruments was that I was able to get to individual perceptions and also to group perceptions of the advertisements. The focus groups were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

I obtained permission from the school authorities, i.e. the principal and the teachers, as well as the learners, to conduct the research at both the schools. The research participants consented to filling in the survey questionnaires and to the audio recording of group interviews. I was granted ethical clearance by the University of the Witwatersrand to conduct the research on the basis that it was neither medically nor psychologically harmful to the research subjects. All the names of the participants and schools have been kept confidential; pseudonyms are used in place of the real names.

As a researcher at the schools, I was already known among the Grade 10 learners amongst whom I was conducting observation. The rest of the learners in the schools were thus already aware of my presence. They were often curious about what I was doing at the school and they were willing to engage in any form of conversation with me. I took advantage of this while doing this research.

During the survey questionnaire and the group interviews, the learners were relaxed and open in terms of giving their opinion. At various stages, they were treated me as one of them during the discussion. For example, sometimes one of them would lead the discussion on advertising and even ask me questions. The interviews were conducted in English and I think that I was taken as an insider among the learners. My age did not pose any inhibition to them.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis encompassed textual analysis and thematic content analysis. As mentioned above, in answering the first research question, this study employed an interpretative textual analysis, which was informed by social semiotics. My analysis was directed at the representations in the advertisements. I combined the data that I received from the survey questionnaire with the focus group discussion data and considered it

together as the interpretations of the print advertisements by the youth that participated in the study.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) 'Grammar of Visual Design' was used for the critical analysis of the four brand advertisements (see Chapter Four). Analysis of the survey questionnaire and interview data was carried out through thematic content analysis. Firstly, I applied thematic content analysis to the responses that I got from the focus groups. Thematic content analysis is similar to one type of content analysis that is described by Spencer, Ritchie and O'Connor (2003: 200) in which themes are identified, with the researcher focusing on the way each theme is treated or presented and the frequency of its occurrence. Berelson (1952) and Robson (2002) in Spencer et al. (2003) claim that the analysis is then linked to 'outside variables' such as gender and the role of the contributor.

I looked for themes and patterns in the transcribed data from the focus group. This helped to build categories of similarities in the reading of an advertisement across different individuals. My interest was also in the extent to which learners read with or against the text. Some learners read the dominant messages of the texts and agreed with them whilst others engaged in a resistant reading of the texts and disagreed with the identities that were 'on sale' in the advertisements.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described the different methods used in order to answer the research questions both in collecting and in analyzing the data. In this study, I used social semiotic and thematic content analysis in order to arrive at 'matches and mismatches' between the constructions in the advertisements and the responses of the learners. In the next chapter, I describe my use of social semiotics to analyze the four fashion brands. My analysis foregrounds the major representations of youth identity as constructed by the advertisers.