



DSPACE

<https://dspace.org/>

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

Ndlangamandla, Clifford

2006-11-01T13:51:26Z

<http://hdl.handle.net/10539/1587>

Chapter Five: Youth Readings of Print Advertisements

The focus of this chapter is on youth interpretations and perceptions of print advertisements, as well as youth responses to the advertisements. I will begin by categorizing the findings according to three technical categories. These are ‘acceptors’, ‘rejecters’ and ‘hedgers’. My use of these categories is based on Peirson-Smith’s (2005: 133) use of these terms in the following way:

Acceptors: those who were positive in their responses to the text and actively identified with the models in the text and/or the products being advertised

Hedgers: those who were unsure of the model or the clothes in the text, possibly because they were beyond their means financially, and who appeared to be experimenting with their own identity

Rejecters: those who appeared to reject the text as aesthetically or culturally offensive or because it opposed their current contextual identity as a student

I have used thematic content analysis to discuss the data. The data is discussed under the following themes. Firstly, young people revealed that they buy some of the brands because they want to appear favourably to their peers (e.g. girls dressing to impress boys); sometimes learners were unsure of the target audience of the advertisement. Secondly, some of the responses indicate that adverts can be symbolic of society’s way of life. Thirdly, a number of the respondents felt that the images represent ‘them’; in other words, they identified with the construction of youth. On the other hand, there was criticism of the over sexualised images of female bodies. Lastly, some learners frequently resisted and rejected the positioning of the advertisements, showing what is called ‘resistant reading’ (Thomas, 2004).

I first turn to the use of the categories: acceptors, rejecters and hedgers (Peirson-Smith, 2005). I am using the term ‘acceptors’ to refer to learners who agreed with the construction of youth identity that is found in the brand advertisement. In agreeing with the construction, their perceptions ranged from those who liked the advertisement,

appreciated the brand, and identified with the representation of youth identity found in the advertisement. There were also those who agreed partially but also disagreed with some aspects of the advertisements. The ‘rejecters’ refer to those who disagreed with the portrayal of youth in the advertisement. They disliked the youth identity that was constructed in the advertisement. Some of them remained loyal to the brand even though they did not like the particular construction of youth identity in the advertisement. Lastly, ‘hedgers’ are those who neither accepted nor rejected the advertisement. They liked some aspects of the advertisement but disagreed with other aspects of it. For each of the four brands, i.e. Soviet, Guess, Diesel and Levi’s, there were acceptors, rejecters and hedgers categorised on the basis of the responses from the survey questionnaires.

5.1 The Soviet Advertisement

There were conflicting responses to the Soviet advertisement. Eight of the 14 learners who responded to the Soviet advertisement did not like the image because of its sexually provocative nature and the fact that it was located in a strip club. They opposed the notion that they could be associated with the sexually inviting models. However, some showed loyalty to the brand label. Six out of 14 learners accepted the construction on the grounds that the advertisement is ‘hot’, ‘cool’ and ‘eye catching’ in the survey questionnaire.

5.2 The Guess Advertisement

Some of the young people did not like the Guess advertisement. Among ten students, of which seven were females and three were males, there was strong dislike of the advertisement on various grounds. Only four appreciated it and one black male offered a hedged response. They felt that it was too sexually revealing. The image of the advertisement was criticized as ‘going too far’ because of the half-nude model. Frequently, the advertisement was interpreted as ‘selling sex’ and not the Guess products.

5.3 The Diesel Advertisement

In terms of the responses that I got to the Diesel advertisement, there appeared to be mixed feelings. Three learners provided hedged responses. These three felt that the advert could be improved through colour. For instance, six learners adored the brand and felt that the advert depicted a pair that was fun loving, dancing, appropriate to the youth market and so on, and three were critical of the sexual connotations in the advertisements. As with the Soviet and Guess advertisements, the Diesel advertisement was criticized for being preoccupied with sex rather than selling the brand. Micarla, a coloured female student, felt that it had:

Mixed signals, it sells sex at the same time, it does not really advertise the clothes.
In other words, it speaks about the people and not the clothes.

The ‘dance movement’ was predominantly interpreted by most of the readers rather than the sexually denotative overall message of the advertisement. Students rather had difficulty in decoding the heading ‘erogenous zone chart’. Their inability to understand ‘erogenous zones’ meant that the advertisement was difficult for them to decode. This is interesting because the verbal text confused the learners more than the images in this advertisement, probably because they were not familiar with the vocabulary. Learners could not make sense of the meanings of the vectors and the percentages until I explained what the implication of the advertisement was. It also came out from the responses that girls want to look sexy so that they can appeal to the opposite sex, probably because this advert has a male and a female.

5.4 The Levi’s Advertisement

The Levi’s advertisement was liked by the majority of the learners. Eleven of the students who filled in the survey questionnaire for the Levi’s advertisement responded positively to the representation of youth in the advertisement. Among the eleven, more were females than males. This was surprising because the Levi’s style of dressing is typical of

men, however, this shows the popularity of the brand amongst females for reasons that are discussed later in this chapter. There were only two learners with hedged perceptions, and both of them were white. Race was significant in relation to the Levi's advert. Learners generally expressed that the Levi's brand/ advertisement is 'fashionable, it reveals social status, it appeals to black man who are Hip Hop fans and artists,...'.

There was no rejecter response to the Levi's advertisement. This was unique because the Soviet, Guess and Diesel advertisements were all rejected by some of the learners. The reason for this could be that, firstly, it is the only advert with a male figure who seems to appeal to both genders, and, secondly, this advertisement is not sexually explicit. I move now to a fuller exploration of the themes that emanated from the survey questionnaires and group interviews with the learners.

5.5 Is this Advertisement Targeted at Men?: 'get (ting) the best fish' (Palesa)

The first theme I will discuss is based on the fact that some of the learners disagreed about the target audience of some of the brands and mentioned that some girls choose what to wear based on their desire to impress boys. The purpose of appealing to the opposite sex was seen to be important by some of the girls when reading the Soviet advertisement. Palesa, a black female student, said that:

Most of our youth think that the only way to get a man is to show off what you got, it also underlines the fact that jeans are hot and in. The reason why our youth doesn't wear much is to get the best fish. (*Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

Elsewhere, in a focus group discussion at Fairview, one girl (Cam below) stated that she feels that people who are younger are easily misled by what is in an advertisement. Her comment suggests that younger people are easily manipulated by advertisements. She says that they dress too provocatively for her taste and that this is uncivilized:

Cam : Sorry can I say something? They don't know where to wear what. They just wear anything anywhere. This Guess ad...shows that if you want a guy you have got to strip love, and that's what most teenagers do when they go partying, they wear nothing, and then you get the civilized teenagers who understand what these ads mean. (*Focus group, 22 Jun 2005, Fairview High School*).

This statement suggests that some of the girls dress for men. Cam mentions that if 'you want a guy (referring to girls) you have got to strip love' (line 3) indicating that it is good for girls to wear very little if they want to attract a guy they desire. Cam reveals that there are different responses that are likely to happen to the same advertisement. She describes some teenagers as 'civilized' because they know how to interpret the advertisement and know how to dress, implying that there are those who are uncivilized who get easily manipulated by the advertisements. However, this is a contradictory response because, on the one hand, Cam says that people should strip in order to attract men, but then she also says that stripping is uncivilized. This contradiction is typical of a post-modern subject as discussed below (Giddens, 1999).

On a slightly different note, some youth seemed to argue about the intended or ideal audience for some of the advertisements. There was a debate about why girls particularly buy products like Guess and Soviet. For instance:

Betty: I mean what's the point of this ad?	[line 1]
(Dan takes it and shows it to the group and laughs)	[line 2]
Betty: It's selling sex and not the Guess products.	[line 3]
Me: most of you said it is appealing only to guys...	[line 4]
Andrew: These are supposed to be female clothing but its appealing	[line 5]
to guys.	[line 6]
Dan: Listen to this, in appealing to guys, then it appeals to the female,	[line 7]
because the female wanna be admired by the guys.	[line 8]
Girls: No, No. I don't dress up and say, I want to appeal to guys.	[line 9]
Ann: We part of this human race...	[line 10]

(Excel focus group discussion, 22 June 2005)

From the data above, one observes a preoccupation among young girls with attracting males and being popular according to Dan (line 8). However, there is also some resistance to this idea, as we can see from the response of the girls above (in line 9 and line 10). Overland (2003:273), when investigating perceptions of race and gender stereotypes among focus groups in Cape Town reported that one of the questions that emanated from the discussions had to do with ‘Do women look good so that men can look at them or do they look good so that women can look at women and aspire to look like them?’ This question was not resolved in her research. Neither was this fully resolved in this study, as some girls opposed this idea when confronted with it but some agreed that they would like to look as good as the model in the advertisement so that they can attract attention.

The learners also argued about whether some of the adverts are intended to appeal to men or to women. Nicki, a girl, said that the Soviet advertisement is about:

A half naked woman in a weird pose, it’s really pathetic, I do not think they know who their target market should be. This is obviously aimed at men; however, women buy clothes more than man. *(Survey questionnaire, Excel High School)*

There is common belief that women like buying fashion more than men. However, the focus-group discussions revealed that adverts like the Guess and Soviet texts appeal more to men. This was confusing to some of the females because the adverts were purporting to sell female clothing as worn by the female models. Therefore, the advertisements do not seem to have a clear cut audience or target group. The learner quoted above (Nicki) said that she did not think that the advertiser knew who the target audience is. This raised a debate in the focus group between men and women in terms of modelling fashion brands. One of the questions that I raised later in the discussion was whether advertisements that are selling fashion brands should always represent both females and males or whether the present practice of having a female only in these fashion products

works best. Some of the respondents felt that it need not necessarily be the case because products are divided according to gender, and magazines are also targeting different audiences. 'You get female magazines and male magazines' said one learner. However, Y magazine and SL magazine are not gendered like this.

Women feel that they are denied their subjectivity and individuality if they are always targeted in relation to pleasing men. As a result, the two white girls denied that they dress to impress men. However, this is not the only view because Vanessa, in the focus group at Fairview High School, (as well as other girls) generally expressed that they would also like to look 'hot' for the public eye as long as they dressed with taste and caution. Perhaps, the two girls did not like the fact that the boys mentioned that they 'dress for guys'. While this may be true, girls may not be comfortable with boys acknowledging it so openly. This denial of some of the messages of the advertisements leads me to discuss the data in relation to reading the advertisements against social reality below, considering whether advertisements reflect social reality or not.

5.6 Advertisements as a Reflection of Social Reality

Advertisements are part of our cultural milieu. Their pervasiveness has been discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two (see also, Banard, 1995, and Dyer 1982). As with other popular culture texts, advertisements can be read against the socio-historical background of the context from which they emanate. One of the research questions was based on whether advertising reflects social reality and whether the reality that is portrayed in advertisements is implicit in the lives of young people, since Schroeder and Borgerson (1998: 161) claim that 'advertising acts as a powerful means of constructing, influencing, and illustrating the consumer vision of the good life, including, in large part, sexual attraction.'

For some of the learners, the advertisements clearly present choices of what to wear, resources that influence their behaviour and a reflection of how to look good by mirroring

the latest trends in fashion and modelling beauty. Silberman, a male student from Excel High School, in referring to the Soviet advertisement, said that:

It is an exact interpretation of life, it shows that the more you flaunt the more interest is given upon those and that to get in (sic) most cases even a look upon you, you would have to get add looks even if bad opinions are given (*survey questionnaire, Excel High School*).

The comment above indicates that the advertisement is regarded as a reflection of social reality. The word ‘flaunt’ is supposedly used to signify the pervasive exposure of body parts by women in a bid to draw the public eye, which is also influenced by advertisements. The ‘flaunting’ is done to attract attention, although it also attracts negative comments as well: ‘even if bad opinions are given to get attention you need to look like this’. Furthermore, in the focus-group discussion, learners commented on whether the adverts represent youth:

Me: Let’s now look at all these ads. Do you think, they represent youth, [line 1]
globally. [line 2]

Wendy: They do... [line 3]

Another: They represent the majority. [line 4]

Wendy: Maybe it’s good that they show these things because in reality, we [line 5]
do see these things...as people. [line 6]

Wendy: It’s the truth. It’s the reality. We like hiding things as people, [line 7]
maybe it’s good, maybe it’s bad, but I think it’s bad for the kids, the little ones
[line8]

who read these ads. [line 9]

(*Focus group discussion, Fairview High School, 22 June 2005*)

From this extract, one observes that learners refer to the half nudity as ‘these things’ (line 5). Learners are imagining half-nude models in print advertisements as an approximation of ‘half-nude dressing’ in real life. In line 7 and line 8, the speaker laments

the effect of such images on younger children. This would mean people who are in lower grades than Grade 11. This argument caused me to question their ages in this focus group and also to question why the speaker feels that she is mature enough to make rational decisions and not to be manipulated by advertisements. She said that this gives a bad impression to a 12 year old or younger teenager, as we can see in the following extract from the Fairview focus group discussion:

Me: How young are you talking about? [line 1]

Lindi: All the ten or 12. [line 2]

Me: Are you not there as well...are you excluded? [line 3]

Vanessa: Yes we are not there, we teenagers. We matured, we know what is happening. [line 4]
[line 5]

Me: How old are you? [line 6]

Girls: we are around 17 and 18. [line 7]

Me: And you think that's pretty matured? [line 8]

Nomi: No it's not pretty matured, you have an understanding of what is happening.[line 9]

Think about showing a child this. They will think that this is the appropriate way[line 10]

and that way could be provocative and then you wonder why things happen [line 11]

and they don't even understand why things happen, whereas if you were an [line 12]

older person, you would know if I wear this I have to wear pants, or [line 13]

something else. [line 14]

Cam: Or where to wear it? [line 15]

Cam: Where to wear it, that is the main point. [line 16]

(Fairview High School, Focus group interview, 22 June 2005)

From the argument above there is an indication that the Grade 11s are around 17 and 18 years old. According to them, this is a mature age and this maturity can be seen in their responses to some advertisements. They do not merely accept whatever is in the media but they are able to read the advertisements critically and they make important decisions about where to wear their clothing [line 9 to line 16]. This is related to a form of critical

literacy (Lankshear, 1997). It also emphasizes that there is some reflection of reality in these advertisements, as they can relate to younger teenagers who are 'deceived or manipulated' by the adverts. It is interesting here that such negative effects are associated with others, 'the third person', and not with the actual viewers. They present themselves as more sophisticated readers because they are older.

In addition, reacting to the question of whether advertisements reflect social reality or not, Jeanette a female student said that the Levi's advert:

Represents the youth of the 21st century, black teens have adapted an American way of dressing the Hip Hop style. It is the type of clothing not in for people in Alexandra. It is in for those suburban richies who are American wanna bee's, baggy clothes would be for them rappers (Hip Hop style) tight jeans for 'house music listeners – dancing wildy'. The advert is spreading a message to those who think the guy (wearing the jeans needs a belt) then you are wrong, your mind is the one which is wrong. (*Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

Jeanette's comment gives her view that advertisements are a representation of different current youth fashion trends that are found in both suburbs and townships. She asserts that there are differences in the way in which people from townships and suburbs dress. These differences are not shown in the advertisement but Jeanette uses the representation in the advert to comment on her social reality. Some of these fashions are imported from foreign countries as the speaker describes some people as 'American wanna bee's' (those that behave like Americans and so would like to be American) who show this through emulating American music stars. In her response, she makes a link between the advertisement and the Hip Hop culture, which comes from America.

The Levi's advertisement was a favourite of the learners. Learner's responses show that they read the construction of Hip Hop culture represented in the image as analysed in Chapter Four. Bogatsu (2002:5) suggests that baggy jeans and baseball caps are synonymous with the Hip-Hop culture of black America and cannot be said to represent a

specifically and authentically local township culture. There are many young people that I have observed in both Fairview and Excel who are fond of Hip Hop. This is exemplified through the way they talk, the way they walk and the different ways of wearing the school uniform that take place at the schools. I have observed some boys who wear their grey uniform trousers in the same manner as the Levi's advertisement. The grey uniform trousers hang down like they are about to fall off, revealing the boys' underwear. However, Jeanette's comment that 'black teens have adapted an American way of dressing the Hip-Hop style' can be interpreted in relation to race, youth fashion and globalization. This is discussed further below.

5.7 Race, Social Class and Globalization – Do White and Black Kids Dress Differently?

The reading of the advertisements was also characterized by deconstructing racial, social and global youth identities from both schools. As discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two, one of the signs of globalization is manifested in global youth cultures, (Dolby, 2000; Klein, 1999).

For instance, in the survey interview, Jeanette notes of the Levi's advert that 'this type of dressing is not in for people in Alexandra, it is in for those suburban richies who are American wanna bee's'. This shows that there is a perception that clothing can reveal where one comes from. If one dresses in the baggy trousers that are Anti Fit, one comes from the suburbs of Johannesburg where the middle and upper classes are found. The way you dress not only reveals where you come from but it can also show what type of music you listen to. Jeanette also said that 'tight jeans- (are) for house music listeners-dancing widely'. It seems that, according to the respondents wearing tight jeans is a dance outfit for house music lovers, as they have to spin their bodies on the dance floor.

However, the stereotype of a dress code of people who live in Alexandra township and those who live in the suburbs was challenged by two girls during the whole-class discussion in Fairview.

G4: I am not going against it [someone had said that the Levi's brand is not for
people from Alexandra. There was laughter at this. One girl challenged this
and said nobody should go against his/her lifestyle] but I am saying people
from the suburbs buy 'Fubu' because they know it costs a lot, then people
from the Township would more like buy 'loxion kulca' because its more of
their type of clothing. Its upcoming and they can afford it.

G3: People of today they are influenced by the type of music they listen to.
In Alex obviously, you find music like house, the type of thing, The artists
who sing house they would not wear baggy clothes, they look at their role
models as to what they wear.

Me: and what do they wear?

G3: They wear tight jeans, the mabhujwa³
type of jeans and takkies,
and then there is the Fubu guys and the Kwaito guys.

(Whol- class discussion, Fairview High School, 11 May 2005)

From the discussion, it becomes clear that young people are fond of brands. Brands can reflect where they are placed in terms of geographic residence and economic social class. The label 'loxion kulcha' is associated with township dwellers, because it is cheaper and it is new. Secondly, G3 (line 7 to line 9) mentions that the type of music people listen to also influences their dress code, suggesting that creates causes a particular dress code. Interestingly, Jeanette also uses the third person demonstrative pronoun 'them', which is typical of black American English. Probably, she identifies the roots of Hip Hop by this, as Hip Hop originated in America.

From the conversation above, through the mention of the word 'bourgeoisie' (line 12), one sees that clothes are an important signifier of social class. The word 'bourgeoisie' refers to a Marxist description of class distinction in society that sees society as being

³ Mabhujwa is an informal word, which is borrowed from the English word 'bourgeoisie'. It means some one who belongs to a wealthy class.

made up of several classes; for example, the upper class as the elite, the bourgeoisie, the middle class and the working class. It seems that membership to this bourgeoisie class is available through consumer brands.

When I asked the learners which amongst the four advertisements they identified with the most, this is what learners had to say during the focus group discussion:

Me: Think of all the ads. [Line 1]

Dan: [taking the Levi's and Diesel] this represents me more than that. [Line 2]

[showing a preference of the Levi's advert and rejecting the Guess and [Line 3]

Soviet advertisements]. [Line 4]

Eggy: This [Levi's] represents me more than the others. [Line 5]

Me: what about people around the school? [Line 6]

Eggy: oh no, no, not to be racist, but white people wear what they wear... [Line 7]

Betty: candy, ... [Line 8]

Eggy: and black people wear like that [Levi's]. Actually the majority of the [Line 9]

black people might dress like the Levi's ad, than the white people. [Line 10]

Betty: But you just see that as the white people, but we see it as the white [Line 11]

'pups', the white this and the white that, there is like 500 groups. [they [Line 12]

are showing that they are aware of heterogeneity] [Line 13]

Dan: even the blacks..amapantsula, [Line 14]

Ken: Yah. (Line 15)

(Excel High School, Focus group, 23 May 2005)

Dan and Eggy above, (line 1 and line 2) show that they identify with the Levi's and Diesel brands. Their identities are manifested in the images of the adverts. As discussed in Chapter Two, Hall (1992) states that identity is implicated in representations. Some of the learners were saying that such jeans that do not fit properly are not targeted at white guys. They argue that the choice of clothing is an important signifier of race, 'white

people wear what they wear....and black people wear like that (referring to the Levi's advert)' (line7 to line 9).

On the other hand, the learners also showed that they are aware of diversity within races. Thus the white girl exaggerates and mentions that there are about 500 different groups of white people and the black boy also mentions that there are different groups of black people as well, such as, 'amapantsula' (line 14). The white girls that were present in the focus groups rejected the idea of an homogeneous white youth culture, by mentioning its diversity as well.

Clothes can both serve as race markers as well as a symbols of those who cross over in terms of racial identity, as has been discussed above. On the surface, the findings in this research seem to be similar to Dolby's (2000) findings, as one of the learners (Dan) a black boy expressed that mostly black people wear Levi's jeans rather than white students, but the learners' recognition of heterogeneity within racial taste differs from Dolby's findings, where racial categories were still quite static. Dolby's fieldwork was conducted not long after the first democratic elections in 1994. At this time there would have still been a marked distinction in terms of race. However, in this study, conducted more than ten years post-democracy, learners are both setting up racial differences and also deconstructing them. Therefore, one cannot say that baggy pants are for blacks only. The findings suggest a more complex relationship between race and taste than that suggested by Dolby. Significantly, what is observed in my study is that social class is also playing an important role.

At the focus-group discussions in Fairview, I was told that most of the learners present could afford to buy Levi's and Soviet. They thought that Guess and Diesel are too expensive but that if they were working they would buy any of these brands. When I asked them if labels are important they said the following.

Me: Is label important? [line 1]

Nomi: It is important, You know about Jenny Button, They have shoes, bags, [line 2]

I would spend 5000 rand on their outfit. [line 3]
 Me: Label is important. [line 4]
 Another: not anymore...Label is overpriced. [line 5]
 Nomi: If you wear label, people say you have got class, you have got money, [line 6]
 actually, **uyi cheese**⁴. [line 7]
 Vannesa: You are a cheese girl [line 8]
 Lindi: For most of us, it is. I used to wear Mr Price in primary school, and then [line 9]
 you get to school, someone is wearing Puma. You don't feel as confident [line 10]
 cause of that label. [line 11]
 Vanessa: I like Timberland. [line 12]

From the excerpt above, labels are seen to indicate social status, money, and self-esteem. The valuing of labels can cause low self-esteem in others, when they cannot afford them. They can make you feel less confident through being excluded by the power of social class (Line 10). The issue of the low status of clothes bought from Mr Price was also mentioned by youth in Farber's (2002) study. Nuttall (2004: 438) states that images in advertisements project an increased self-consciousness of the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process. People use fashion brands to stylise themselves.

As a result of social-class boundaries, my research subjects referred to those who can afford to consume more expensive products as 'cheese boys and cheese girls'. This is one of the terms that are currently used around Johannesburg when referring to 'youth subcultures' of consumption. They are part of the many terms that have come to be part of the name calling that occurs in the schools among youth and among adults outside the school. They occur alongside names like 'coconut'⁵.

From the above evidence, advertisements demonstrate a multifarious relationship with young people. Sometimes brands give the learners an identity that is attached to race, social class and music preferences. These identities are hybrid forms. For example, local

⁴ Cheese boys and cheese girls refer to rich young people.

⁵ Coconut refers to people who are black but whose behaviour is typical of white people.

Hip Hop is influenced by the global Levi's fashion style. It reveals that the learners draw from advertisements in constructing their social reality. In the next section, I discuss further data that shows how such social identities are translated to 'the self' by the readers.

5.8 Identification with the Brand

Research that has been conducted in the United Kingdom suggests that there are intricate identities that are revealed in advertising, for instance:

Further ethical issues point to marketing's commodification of human beings, employing bodies and body images to promote products and services, thus associating identity with consumption, and existence with market processes'....when marketing campaigns represent identities of groups or individuals so that the representations themselves purport to express something true or essential about those represented, aesthetic and ethical questions intersect, and allow certain ontological assumptions to emerge (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005: 31).

Schroeder and Borgerson (2005) propose that products are given social identities by marketers. The identities of the image associated with products are assumed to be transferable to the consumers who purport to identify with the brands (as stated in Hattori (1997) in Chapter Two). In my sample, learners sometimes identified or did not identify with the fashion brands. For 11 learners, the Hip-Hop style of dressing presented in the Levi's advertisement represents everyday reality. They felt that it is the best selling style. It was lauded as 'Baggy jeans are ideal, the jeans are cool and make you feel good'. This shows that wearing particular clothing is believed to make one feel good, and highlights the connection between consumption and the self, (Giddens, 1999). Giddens (1999) expresses the notion that self-identity is associated with consumption of particular products and that individual products are commodified, meaning that the product comes to be associated with particular human values.

This is shown at the beginning of one of the focus group discussions at Fairview when one of the girls (Wendy) was ecstatic about the Levi's advertisement. She said 'this rocks my world, Bhekithemba's friend is like this..ebenje futhi agcoke kanje (he was like this and he was dressed like this)'. She was referring to a 'guy' whom she had met the previous Saturday. The five girls who were at the interview all agreed that he was 'hot' ('hot' means attractive and good looking, and to some of the learners it means sexy). Unfortunately for Wendy, the girl who met the guy wearing Anti Fit Levi's Jeans, she did not get to know his name so that they could become 'friends', as she mourns that 'I did not get his name gal...my heart was so sore.' Her language use here is typical of black American English. As she uses the word 'gal' and refers to her heart being 'sore', she is styling herself as a Hip Hop fan who draws from American varieties of English. She also emphasizes that the style of dressing represented stands for a particular kind of guy who was attractive to her.

According to some of the respondents, advertisements do construct individual identities. Vanessa, also a black female student, said that:

Adverts have different meanings to different people, one could say that the adverts help to construct identities, which is true at times because adverts help you find what you are looking for and for what best suits you (*Focus group, Fairview High School, 22 June 2005*).

This suggests that advertisements are now taking up the role of 'advisor'. Vanessa reveals that nowadays young people have more faith in advertisements than in other sources in constructing identity. In saying that adverts help to 'construct identities' Vanessa is aware of the role of such texts and their influence on how young people see themselves (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). She uses the second person pronoun 'you' which is popular in advertising discourse. This suggests the conversational tone of adverts and their close influence on their addressees.

One male student linked his approval of the Levi's advertisement to his identification with the product offered, 'I like it because I wear jeans like that'. This indicates that advertisements sometimes reflect/represent some of the young people. Nuttall (2004: 439) describes the images that are found in SL and Y Magazine as imagined identities and refers to the language of aspired futures that are found in images. She cites that in the June-July 2002 issue, the editors of Y magazine stated that their product is made for those who aspire to hip, cutting-edge, middle-class lifestyles in the city. The editors acknowledge a potential 'gap': a gap of potential, between what is and what could be (Nuttall, 2004: 439). However, in my research, the responses from the learners indicated that learners do not necessarily speak about their aspirations towards being like the images, although they claim to identify with the images in the present. However, this statement cannot be judged to be accurate or inaccurate because somebody might say that they wear something when in actual fact they do not wear it. This resonates with 'the futures' or 'aspirations' Nuttall (2004 and 2005) writes about.

As pointed out in the opening discussion about hedgers, there were some contradictory responses to the advertisements. The learners were often torn between seeing advertisements as degrading because of the representation of sexuality and their desire to buy the brand because of its prestige. This desire, as exemplified in Amina's opinion below, shows the conflicting demands of consumerism that young people are faced with:

The advert (brand) [Guess] does not state what it is selling. She looks as if she is dancing in a sexual manner. There is no message and the target market they are trying to target is not clear. As they say sex sells. It's a cool advert – it makes me want to buy the clothes she is wearing, only because she is pretty, however I feel that it is degrading woman because every advert nowadays has naked women or should I say barely dressed women. (*Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

In the extract above, Amina shows a multiplicity of identities. In this case the learner is torn between the love of the brand and rejection of the sexual depiction. This corroborates the argument by Hall (1992: 277) '...as the systems of meaning and cultural

representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily’. In this case Amina is able to make a temporary or fleeting identification with the advert because of her identification with the Guess brand even though she is uncomfortable with the accompanying sexuality represented in the image. Learners contradictory responses can also be explained in relation to the notion of unified self identity versus fragmented self identity, (Giddens, 1999: 417). According to Giddens (1999), the view of the fragmented self identity is often thought to imply that an individual has as many selves as there are divergent contexts of interaction. The power of consumption also plays a persuasive role, for example, Amina envies the beauty of the model at the same time as she rejects some elements of the advert.

Teresa, a black female student, could not identify with the Levi’s advertisement. She felt excluded by the advertisement because of the Hip-Hop culture represented and the fact that it had a male only. She is, however, a fan of the Levi’s brand and she decided to reconstruct the advertisement to suit her own identity:

One of the best labels especially the No.501, is the best pair of jeans. It’s the Hip Hop outfit. I think they should have shown a guy and a girl wearing the Levi’s Jeans, one representing girls and one representing the guys, together playing by the water, barefooted, the guy with a nice Levi’s T-shirt and the girl with a smart skin top for girls. The message that is communicated is that only Hip Hop fans wear Levi’s, with boots, turned caps, and they must have the bling bling (flashy jewellery). (*Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

Teresa above feels excluded by the advertisement and she describes an alternative romantic scene, probably next to the beach or a lake, which would fit her identity with the same brand. This shows that she admires the brand but she is definitely not appreciative of the Hip- Hop style, which the advertiser has chosen to appeal to. Also interesting is the fact that it is not just advertisements creating a fantasy world that young people aspire to but they can create their own fantasy and project this onto the brand, especially if they

like the brand but not an advert of the brand. Teresa also positions herself as a heterosexual being who would like to accommodate her partner in the way in which she dresses.

The Diesel advertisement was thought of as being cool and funky. Learners felt that Diesel is fashionable for young people. One learner who admires the brand said that it, 'makes me feel like buying the brand'. One said that 'you could feel free and the opposite sex will be interested in you in a party'. This shows that this young person is fond of the idea of freedom and partying. Wearing Diesel at a party is probably a big moment in one's public image. Supposedly, wearing Diesel lends the young person an identity that is associated with partying and freedom. The advertisement represents a sense of fashionable freedom because of the dance, as was indicated in Chapter Four above, where Diesel was characterised as a 'funky' heterosexual brand. This also signifies that advertisers intend to appeal to youth through music and dance because they think that youth will buy the product if it is associated with something from youth culture. The next section reveals how the old advertising adage 'sex sells' was heavily criticized by some learners.

5. 9 'We [are] not all about sex' (Bani)

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings was the negative reaction of many of the respondents to the use of nudity and sexuality in the advertisements. Advertisers seem to use explicit sexuality in advertisements under the assumption that this is what 'sells' to youth. However, when carrying out the investigation, there were responses that were strongly critical of the representation of half nude models in the advertisements. Learners felt that this is degrading the female body. The learners' view was that such poses as shown in the Soviet and Guess advertisements lower female dignity in their treatment of them as though they are sex objects. One of the respondents said that the Guess model also creates low self esteem among those females who do not possess her kind of body. They also questioned whether the purpose of the advertisement was to sell the clothes or to sell sex.

Among the readers who criticized the use of sexuality in the Soviet advert are Letta and Bani :

To me the use of sex appeal doesn't have an effect as it seems that in most adverts the same theme is repeated, and as for the background picture it tells us a lot on how woman are seen as sex idols (Letta, *Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

I don't like it because its all about sex appeal and the models. If you don't have that kind of a body, your self esteem depreciates. And at most times feel fat and ugly, They are saying that if you don't wear Soviet garments then you won't have sex appeal. This advert is discriminating my body and pride. The advertiser is not respecting female bodies. We not all about sex. And what the advert is saying is that we should walk around naked (Bani, *Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

This opinion seems to suggest that youth are aware of the objectification of women in society particularly through advertisements. This was discussed as the represented identity of Soviet in Chapter Four, (Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998). Moreover, the two girls dislike the fact that advertisements tend to display the slim model figure. They feel that this causes fat people to develop low self esteem. Bani complains that this advert lowers the pride and dignity of females. She thinks it is degrading for the female body to be portrayed as a sex object. In one instance, a learner (Ntombi) expresses extreme disgust at the Soviet advertisement by saying: 'I hate it. It is too explicit. The background girls are appalling.'

One learner referring to the Guess advertisement said that 'It does less to promote the actual clothing'. Learners in a focus group discussion at Fairview High School said that the clothes are not given as much publicity as the genital region of the body of the woman. They rejected the construction in the advertisement, saying that:

- It conveys a bad appearance to the young people of this country.
- [It] does not reflect the South African youth.
- Most girls who dress in this way are wild and looked down upon.

This suggests that dressing in an appropriate manner is highly valued by some young people in society. Most of the learners asked ‘what is the point of the (Guess) advertisement?’ Their opinion was that advertisements should represent Guess in terms of wearing the clothing or the brand rather than in terms of the ‘naked’ girl. Some of the readers complained that they do not know what Guess is about. They saw that the model was wearing denim but felt that the clothes are superseded in the attention of the reader by the half naked female body. Therefore, some learners felt that ‘it does not advertise the clothes, it speaks about the people.’

In the focus group at Excel High School, there was emphasis on the idea that ‘sex sells’ by some of the male participants. However, the two white girls disagreed with this.

- | | |
|---|----------|
| Dan: Sex sells, point closed. | [Line 1] |
| Eggy: and it works. | [Line 2] |
| Dan: What’s the point of a woman dressing to cover up to the ankles. | [Line 3] |
| [showing the Guess advert with legs spread apart] | [Line 4] |
| Betty: It’s like taking off your clothes; nobody would like to dress like | [Line 5] |
| this. (<i>Focu-group discussion, Excel High School, 23 May 2005</i>) | [line 6] |

The two male participants, Dan and Eggy, agree that sex sells. However, Betty a female participant, compares the Guess advert to nudity (lines 5 and 6). From this debate, one would say that sex does not always sell, especially because the Guess and Soviet advertisements are using female models and are supposedly targeting females. Some girls complained about the portrayal of women in the Guess advertisement. They said that such an advertisement is saying that women are cheap. Some felt utter disgust at the model. They claimed that ‘her facial expression is appalling’, ‘the woman is not

interesting and sparks nothing’. Some said that ‘the body should be shown more sensitively and appropriately for the viewers’. However, this strong criticism of sex seemed to be directed to the Guess advertisement more than at the sexual identity that had been created in Soviet. While Soviet appeared to be more sexually explicit to me than the Guess advertisement, according to my analysis in Chapter Four, learners may have been more uncomfortable with the display of female sexual pleasure than the male penetrative sexual fantasy that is depicted in Soviet.

Some of the learners felt that there is a lack of originality and creativity in the Guess advertisement. One learner said that ‘my feeling is that the advertisement is not really original because these days to sell anything they usually use half naked people anyway.’ It seems that in this learner’s view, sex has been over used in advertisements. The learners are already aware that sex is always used to persuade them to buy the products. They are now disinterested in its use. They would like to see some creativity in the advertisements. This may come as a surprise to advertisers who seem to think that youth will be attracted to such advertisements. This finding subverts a stereotype that is prevalent among advertisers that depicting half-nude females on bill boards and magazines will sell the product because the audience desires this. This stereotype is typified in the Imbali Lodge bill board discussed in Chapter Four. It was observed in the focus-group discussions and the survey questionnaires that more of the critical comments of the Guess and Soviet advertisements came from female learners than male learners. It appears that females are more sensitive to the way their bodies are displayed in the media than their male counterparts, especially if the body that is objectified is female. In contrast, the male audience seemed to articulate the voice of the advertisers. The last section discusses the different reading positions that young people took up in relation to the advertisements.

5.10 Resistant Reading

The data shows that young people do not merely receive what the media presents as factual. They actually engage in a resistant reading of the construction of youth identity in the media (Thomas, 2004). As mentioned in Chapter Two, Thomas (2004:54) describes three types of reading. These are preferred reading, negotiated reading and resistant reading. The preferred reading position adopts the reading privileged by the discourse. It is the invited, intended or authoritative reading. The second reading position is the alternative, or negotiated, position, where the reader ‘recognizes as appropriate the legitimacy of the preferred definition, but identifies certain discrepancies or “exceptions to the rule” within a specific situational context’ (Allan, 1998, In Thomas, 2004). In oppositional reading or resistant reading, the authority of the preferred reading is challenged and resisted as the reader’s own values are ascribed to the textual manifestation of the discourse (Richardson, 1998, in Thomas, 2004). Therefore, the readers of the advertisement can take up different positions in relation to the text, they may agree or disagree with it, be critical, negotiated, or oppositional.

Happy, a black female student, showed resistance to consumerism and the whole notion that advertisements create unnecessary desires and over expenditure of money, by saying:

It’s a very cool advert, the brand name is terrific, But I don’t get intimidated by adverts, they are just a brand name which I really don’t care about. ...That if you wear ‘Guess’ labels you are ‘hot’, that is just ridiculous, he was trying to persuade consumers to buy...I don’t feel the need to buy Guess Jeans. (*Survey questionnaire, Fairview High School*)

Happy shows her ability to assert individuality and to resist the pressure to identify with particular brands. She appears empowered to reject the appeal of the advertisement and

therefore the ideological power of the text. This suggests that she can be associated with a rational reader of the advert (Janks, 2002), as well as a resistant, or oppositional reader.

Another learner showed a sophisticated awareness of common advertising strategies that play on psychological needs and desires, stating ‘I couldn’t care less. It is another attempt to group people according to their clothes in order to make money, by prying on peoples need to belong.’ This can be related to the belief that products become a badge of membership through the individual qualities they promise to impart to us and through the social groups they associate us with. Williamson (1978: 45-7) and Goatly (2000: 191) state that this creates a kind of spurious social solidarity, a modern equivalent of totemism, in the form of ‘consumer clubs’ – the collection of individuals who use or own an identical product.

Nicki made critical comments about the Soviet advertisement in relation to the verbal text and the image. The verbal text states that, ‘wearing your clothes can be so much better than taking them off.’ She challenged this statement by saying that, ‘this statement is contradictory because they are using sex to sell. The girl is barely wearing clothes anyway’. According to the perception of the reader, the woman was not properly dressed, and she also critiqued the lack of fit between the image and the text. Nicki also argued that contemporary society seems to favour the wearing of fewer clothes than society did in the past. Her comment was based on the fact that the fashion trend is about wearing less nowadays than it was the case in previous generations. In her view, people expose more of their body than is appropriate. She said that ‘in the fifties an advert like this one would have been banned.’ This argument shows that Nicki is aware of advertising standards that were acceptable in the past and the fact that such standards have changed. It also shows youth as critical readers who are aware of how advertising works. Lusubilo echoes this when she says that, ‘my opinion is that the advertisement (Guess) is not really original because these days to sell anything they usually use half naked people anyway.’

The South Africa Advertising Authority (SAAA) is a body that regulates advertisements aired to the public. It also receives complaints from the public about advertisements that

are offensive. Sexually explicit advertisements may be censored as might racist advertisements that are seen as offensive. However, there does not seem to have been a public outcry about the Soviet advertisement.

Furthermore, in reaction to the comment that this image of the female body would not have been observed 50 years ago, during the focus group discussion, two boys said that 'now we are free'. They were equating the South African democracy with the 'taste of fashion'. One of the boys said that now 'we are back to the beginning'. He provided a religious analogy by saying that:

First, in the beginning, Adam and Eve were naked, then they moved to the leaves and then clothes and then back to naked; now we are back to the beginning.

(Focus-group discussion, Excel High School, 23 May 2005)

This statement is a satire of the biblical account of the creation of human beings that seeks to justify why models pose in half nudity for the media and ultimately why people dress in half nudity for the public. What is obvious from this is that the boys found the depiction of the female body humorous, whereas the girls did not find it fair or funny.

5.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, the interpretations of the learners indicate that advertisements are crucial for the way in which young people do or do not see themselves. They do not always act as a mirror of youth culture, but sometimes show the opposite of what youth want, as Ntombie says:

It states that females are cheap and we'd rather take off our clothes and show our bodies than wear them or keep them on which ain't fair. Its absolutely disgusting and I hate it, it's too explicit for eyes to see and the background ladies who are naked appalling. (Ntombie, *Survey questionnaire*)

Strong dislike of Guess and Soviet and the critique of oversexualized images was more common among female learners than male learners. Rather than identifying with the Soviet advert, Ntombie clearly rejects the heterosexual invitation to male penetrative sex on offer (see Chapter Four). Sometimes advertisements show only what young people are ‘aspiring to’ as when Vanessa says ‘that’s what I want to look like [referring to the Guess advert]....because ...look at the reaction I got from looking at this, imagine the reaction people would get from seeing me like this.’

Vanessa aspires to look like the model. This aspiration is part of a growing trend among youth consumers of being part of ‘imagined communities’ (Nuttall, 2005; Klopper, 2005). Klopper (2005: 176) argues that ‘despite the ongoing realities of racial tensions and economic inequalities, style surfing is affording previously unimaginable opportunities to bridge South Africa’s historically divided cultural arena’. The notion of taste or consumer habits are revealing convergences and divergences within different races (e.g the Levi’s Anti Fit jeans) and matters of social class are also rising above other variables like race.

In some instances, there is an identification with the advertisements, as when two boys in a focus group pick up the Levi’s and Diesel adverts and say that ‘this represents me more than the others’. On this occasion, young people are identifying with the brands. Herbst (2005: 15) writes that ‘adverts operate by linking formless desire to specific forms (commodities), and the key to this linkage is identification – the process whereby one associates with something to take on some of its qualities.’ Such qualities as ‘funky’, ‘hip’, and ‘sexy’ are associated with brands, and the individuals wearing the brands take on the very identity of being hip, funky or sexy.

On the basis of this multiplicity of responses to the adverts, which are first demonstrated through acceptance, rejection and hedging, one can infer that the media representations and the youth identities they portray are being contested and renegotiated to suit each individual.