



"i'm riskin' it": Teachers Take On Consumerism

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Abstract:	<p>This qualitative study investigates how 90 teachers explored critical curriculum through their reading, analysis and creation of counter advertisements. Located in critical social semiotics and visual discourse analysis, we began this study with one overarching question: To what extent can teachers, engaged in a critical literacy curriculum, talk back to messages of consumerism as depicted in advertisements, by creating their own counter ads? More specifically, we wanted to know: What messages do teachers talk back to when they create counter ads? How do they critically repackage their advertisement to ensure that viewers read their messages in particular ways? We found that teachers did talk back to messages of consumerism and found that knowing how to analyze visual texts enabled them to understand how to integrate this work into their own critical literacy curriculum.</p>

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Figure 1. Counter ad, fast foods.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

“Just do it.” “Got milk?” “My wife, I think I’ll keep her.” “Betcha can’t eat just one.”

“Expect more. Pay less.” “I’m lovin’ it.”

Snappy jingles, memorable taglines: these mantras permeate every facet of our everyday lives, from the time we wake up in the morning “to Folgers in our lives,” to the time we go to bed by “taking Sominex at night to sleep. Safe and restful sleep, sleep, sleep.” Companies bank on consumers’ instant recall of these taglines that accompany advertisements all in the hopes of amassing huge profits. As consumers, we’re “riskin’” potentially harmful effects that a product might have on us (e.g., fast food), because companies advertise only the best features of their product. One only has to recall the documentary *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004) in which Spurlock studied the consequences that a month-long diet of McDonald’s fast food had on his health.

We have become a culture of consumerism argue scholars (Beach, (2007; Buckingham, 2007, 2009; Fiske, 1986; Schor, (2004), and adults as well as children now have unprecedented

access to advertisements through a range of media. With children as one of the most targeted populations, marketing corporations consciously attempt to create the type of people they want us to become (Beach, 2007). Children have become, suggests Schor (2004), the epicenter of American consumerism, and parents, now working longer hours and spending less time with them, give them guilt money, which leads then to children's increased consumerism. Further, Schor found that children's spending correlates with increased consumption of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes, and increased levels of anxiety. Brockhoff's documentary, *Shop 'til You Drop* (2010), addresses the history and patterns of consumeristic spending across the decades, and experts in this video suggest that advertisements incite in us a desire to have and to own. It's this emotion and feeling of "wanting" that encourages increased spending habits from the very young to the very old. In essence, advertisements attempt to shape our social, intellectual, and psychological behaviors so that we will purchase particular products (Beach, 2007; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 2004), and vicariously take on the lifestyles that entertain these products.

Although literacy educators argued for the critique of media texts such as advertisements (Authors, 2008; Beach, 2007; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Marsh, 2006), few opportunities are provided in the standard literacy and language arts curricula, largely because educators see such engagements as not academically rigorous (Marsh, 2006). We suggest that few pre- or inservice teachers in teacher education programs are given opportunities to read, study, and analyze visual texts, such as advertisements. Given the pervasiveness of advertisements as everyday texts, we maintain that such analysis should be a regular part of teacher education programs. In so doing, teachers can begin to take a critical stance towards the reading of a range of texts (Authors, 2008; Vasquez, 2004), which, in turn, may then become a valuable part of literacy curricula.

As critical educators who work with literacy and language arts teachers, we see critique of everyday texts, or texts that we encounter in our everyday lives (advertisements, cereal boxes, billboards, posters, etc.) as an essential part of critical literacy curricula, teacher preparation, and instruction. In his discussion of the various knowledges in teacher education, Kincheloe (2004) presents reflective-synthetic knowledge as one in which teachers are engaged in developing thinking that is critically aware, thoughtful, ethical, and politically just. Such thinking works to expose assumptions about the neutrality of information and messages, and studies the forces and cultural knowledges that shape information. Within this knowledge perspective, we suggest that as teacher educators, we must engage teachers in experiencing ways in which they can examine media, like advertisements, and critically analyze the messages sent, interpreted and produced. From our work with teachers across the years, we understand that when they engage with such critical literacy experiences, they will more likely introduce them to their students. We designed this study to understand how teachers currently read advertisements, and when offered strategies to read everyday texts critically, how can they talk back to messages of consumerism. This interest arises from our commitment to work with teachers in their desire to become critical educators and to integrate this learning into their own literacy instruction.

We began this study with one overarching question: To what extent can teachers, engaged in a critical literacy curriculum talk back to messages of consumerism as depicted in advertisements, by creating their own counter advertisements (counter ads)? More specifically, we wanted to know: What messages do teachers talk back to when they create counter ads in response to the everyday world of advertisements? How do they critically repackaging their advertisement to ensure that readers read their messages in particular ways? What do teachers' interpretations of advertisements and their counter ads offer educators as insight for creating

curriculum? Figure 1 is an example of one of 19 counter ads in our data set that teachers created in response to a set of advertisements, and reflects our continued investigation into critical readings of media texts, and locating such work in supporting teachers to develop critical literacy curricula.

We argue that investigations into how advertisements semiotically work are significant in a world dominated by visual images. Further, how teachers read and interpret *what* these everyday texts say (underpinning messages), as well as *how* these messages are said (written/visual language), is especially important in school spaces where choice of what commercially-produced visual texts get placed on walls or in classrooms is made by teachers or administrators. From ads in school books, searches done in magazines and on the Internet, to the plethora of advertisements that viewers—adults and children alike--encounter while downloading music, images, and video for school projects, we argue that this work is crucial.

Advertisements as Everyday Texts

Advertisements are everyday texts that children, youth, and adults view daily, and research suggests that these ads are working. People view over 40, 000 advertisements each year (Schor, 2004), and the average young person views more than 3000 ads per day on television (TV), on the Internet, on billboards, and in magazines. Advertisers make efforts to encourage young children to identify with brand names as early as possible, which results in advertising as a \$250 billion/year industry with 900 000 brands to sell (Quart, 2003). Children and teens are big consumers: teenagers spend \$155 billion/year, children younger than 12 years spend another \$25 billion, and both groups influence perhaps another \$200 billion of their parents' spending per year (Quart, 2003; Ohayon, 2011). As a result, advertisers find new ways to promote their products including sides of busses, bathroom stalls, Internet videos, and so on. According to

Kelly and Ellwanger (2008), children ages 6-11 access the internet frequently to find out more about products they see in advertisements. Further, these analysts found that of the 10.7 million young consumers who reported visiting a company's website after viewing its ad, 26.5% are 6-7 years old, 33.3% are 8-9 years old and 40.2% are 10-11 years old. More surprisingly, experts estimate that children between the ages of 2 and 14 influence how households spend \$500 billion dollars a year (Calvert, 2008). These data suggest that awareness of the power relations and intentions which underpin advertisements is essential, especially in school spaces where students see advertisements across school spaces (classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, vending machines, etc.). Further, when teachers are aware of the influence advertisements have on us as consumers, and especially the children they teach (Kelly & Ellwanger, 2008), then work such as this will be seen as an essential part of literacy curriculum.

The construction of childhood has shifted in light of media and consumerism, and teachers' awareness of this shift is significant to their teaching practices. Media, including advertisements, has become what Buckingham (2007) has called an "inescapable fact of contemporary childhoods" (p. 43), and children can access global and local information in ways never before seen. Only within the last two decades, argues Livingstone (1998), have children been studied from a sociological perspective, but even then, children are constructed as having an unmediated set of practices in which they live in a jump-rope-play-in-yard-unfettered world. However, with increased media consumption, there has been a homogenization of childhood, one "in which cultural differences are being flattened out and erased" (Buckingham, p. 45). One only has to see the impact of huge corporations like Disney and cable channels and shows like Nickelodeon, *Sesame Street*, and the Cartoon Network to see children's enthusiastic and worldly response to such characters as Snow White, Goofy, Big Bird, and Hannah Montana. In concert,

companies market to these interests by creating products (e.g., action figures, fashion, posters, etc.) and websites, replete with advertisements. Such products encourage desire in children to own these products and vicariously participate in the lifestyles represented by these characters. In essence, as Buckingham suggests, such engagement with media works to shape a homogenized child, one who is constructed as wanting and needing to be these those represented in and through products and product placement. Marketed as kid-only zones, parents trust the information and programming produced and aired, and children are often left to their own viewing and consumption of the messages presented. As Author (2008) suggests, teachers must be aware of how to support students in critical readings of media texts to help students become more conscious consumers of said texts.

Like other scholars, we recognize the significance that advertisements and the messages that they convey have on shaping identity and promoting homogenization (Beach, 2007; Kalantzis, Cope & 2003; Luke, Comber, & O'Brien, 1996). According to Kalantzis et al, meaning is made and interpreted in ways that are increasingly multimodal, and thus, a "new basics," (Kalantzis, et al., p. 16) is emerging. The new basics, influenced by technology advances, require that individuals be autonomous and self-directed, flexible, collaborative, and critical. The new basics necessitate a move beyond the old basics of reading, writing and arithmetic and towards an ability to read and critique multimodal texts in which "meaning is carried as much visually as it is by words and sentences" (Kalantzis, et al., p. 22). Luke et al., (1996), argue that we live in a fast capitalistic society, an ever-expanding post-industrial information age that enables companies to compete globally. They point out the importance that must be placed on critical readings of ads. They present one teacher's critical work with first-grade children's reading of Mother's Day gift catalogs. After children participated in critical readings, they understood that

mothers in these catalogs were tied to consumerism, an explicit example of how critical readings precipitated social action. These scholars posit that critical reading and critical thinking must be considered essential commodities for individual and collective survival (i.e., individuals and groups need them to compete effectively) in our rapidly expanding info-world (Paul, 1990).

In our critical interaction with media texts like advertisements, individual agency emerges before collective agency. Because our individual responses are socially rooted, whether we are aware of it or not, we are positioned to read advertisements in particular ways, and also to read against them in particular ways. To teach learners read against messages, argues Luke and Elkins (1998), is to teach literacy in which readers engage with all features of a text, and develop a social and cultural consciousness of changing processes, practices and contexts of literacy.

Theoretical Framework

We located this study in critical social semiotics and visual discourse analysis (Author, 2007). Semiotics is a theory that explores the nature and function of signs as well as the systems and processes underlying signification, expression, representation, and communication. According to Hodge and Kress (1988), a semiotic system, defined as a collection of signs that operate together, is generally treated as static. For example, an advertisement is a static text in that the objects and elements work together to convey a message. In social semiotics, systems cannot be viewed in isolation but must be studied as part of one's social practices, their motivations, their origins, and destinations. The system and the text are studied in a variety of ways and in a range of social contexts (Hodge & Kress, 1988). With our own interest in the critical, we suggest that attention must be paid particularly to disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, and realizing that attitudes and dispositions emerge from conscious engagement with social issues and languages (art, drama, music, movement, language,

math) with an understanding that there are alternate ways of being, and being reflexive (Author, 2008). Within the theory of critical social semiotics, we posit that context and text are interrelated; the text creates the context as much as the context creates the text. Meaning arises from the friction between the two (Halliday, 1985). Further, as Stephens (1998) writes, meaning is mediated not just by language but also by social images which are increasing significant given the proliferation of visual communication in public spaces (e.g., classrooms, hallways, billboards, busses, etc.) (Anstey & Bull, 2000; Raney, 1998; Tomaselli, 1996). In this study, critical social semiotics allowed us not only to understand how the context in which these teachers worked (critical literacy curriculum) informed their reading and interpretation of advertisements, and creation of counter ads, but also to understand how teachers positioned their viewers to read these texts in specific ways (e.g., written text on visual texts, cultural symbols).

Visual discourse analysis (VDA) (Author, 2007) is both a theory and method of analysis that focuses its attention on visual media or texts. Visual discourse analysts study the structures within visual texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and also attempt to identify the discourses that underpin the message(s) conveyed, and which emerge as a result of the choices made by the textmakers in her/his visual text. In VDA, visual elements take on particular significance according to object placement, size, intensity, color, modality (the realness of an object) and so on. Further, visual modes of representation communicate messages that are culturally specific; that is, they are immediately read and interpreted across cultural groups and situations. Additionally, visual texts have structures that are interactive. That is, they are designed to encourage readings by particular groups and anticipate particular sorts of reception and responses (Fairclough, 2001). Having said that, however, texts are also polysemic; they are open to a multitude of readings through transaction between the reader and the text to construct meaning

(Rosenblatt, 1996). In terms of structure, textmakers compose visual texts that have particular orientations (e.g., top to bottom, left to right) and encourage particular readings through object placement, size, color, shapes, and so on. Discourse analysis assumes all texts are ideological and contain particular cultural models or frames for viewing the world (Gee, 2005). That is, embedded within the choices of the textmaker are discourses, ideas, and concepts with which they align their own beliefs. For example, vegetarians hold particular beliefs about animals while meat eaters hold others. These beliefs emerge in their talk, diet, and other aspects of their lives. Their readings of ads related to meat products could, and mostly likely, would be different. In the context of this study, visual discourse analysis helped us read the structures within each of the counter ads, how objects functioned within these ads, and the discourses the textmakers conveyed within their ads and which discourses they spoke against.

Overview of the Study

This study evolved from our ongoing studies of visual texts and from our need to extend this conversation to texts such as advertisements that populate our lives (Author, 2007; Authors, 2008; 2010). Systematic analysis and articulation of methods that enable close readings of visual texts is significant for literacy teachers and researchers for several reasons. First, critical literacy positions all texts as political (Janks, 2000; 2010); this necessitates that readers understand how dominance and power operate in texts, how to access and speak against dominance, and how texts of various genres (including advertisements) position people in particular ways. Second, visual texts created in English language arts settings are rarely read deeply for the messages sent through image and which, when read with an informed eye, make visible the beliefs and experiences of the textmaker. Thus, visual texts are ripe for the reading, and art as a language for critique and discussion. Third, analyses of relationships between and among objects within a

visual text -- what semioticians call “signs” -- along with a holistic reading of the often implicit overall text, provide information about how texts position readers as well as encourage readers to take on certain identities, values, and ideologies other than their own. Said another way, we no longer can put aside art as a language system, nor its everyday use in shaping a culture's identity.

Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted with 90 elementary and secondary teachers enrolled in a language education masters program in North America that focused on critical literacy in practice. Before we conducted this study, teachers in this program had had a number of experiences working with critical literacy (e.g., reading and responding to picturebooks with important social issues, reading professional resources on critical literacy), as well as experiences representing their interpretations of texts through visual means. Teachers were receptive to critical literacy curricula, as many of them teach in high-poverty schools and neighborhoods, and were eager to implement additional critical literacy strategies in their classes.

Procedures

We invited teachers to read, interpret and discuss the messages conveyed within professionally-generated advertisements found in public spaces such as magazines, home improvement stores, and the Internet, ads that we had used in an earlier study that investigated children's and preservice teachers' responses to messages conveyed in these ads (Authors, 2008). The ads we chose were those created by Home Depot's Disney line of paints, Burger King, McDonalds, a U.S. army ad, Ralph Lauren, and Walmart (see Authors, 2008, for a more complete description). We specifically asked them to respond to the following questions:

- What do you think the designer of this advertisement is selling?
- How are they selling this product/concept/idea?

- How do they arrange/organize and/or include visual elements within the advertisement that makes this ad effective or not effective?

Following this discussion, we introduced Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework for studying the grammar of visual design including canvas orientation, quadrants of information, directionality, color, modality, among other visual design elements. We returned to these ads, and asked teachers to read these advertisements with this framework in mind. After this, we introduced them to visual discourse analysis (Author, 2007) and asked them to identify the discourses that underpinned messages in these ads, and how they positioned the viewer to read the text in particular ways. Within the context of VDA, we then introduced the concept of counter ads, showing them professionally-generated counter ads such as Joe Camel/Joe Chemo, American Idol) retrieved from such sites as www.adbusters.org and those constructed by teachers in other academic settings.

Teachers were invited to repackage an ad from a critical perspective; in other words, we asked them to create a counter ad. This meant that they could alter the original ad and/or redesign an ad based upon the original ad speaking to and against messages and underlying systems they saw operating within these ads. Working in groups of three to six, teachers collaboratively chose one of the professional ads that we had introduced or selected one in magazines we provided. They used a variety of art materials (assorted papers, paint, magazines, markers, crayons, pencil colors, core foam, found objects, among others) to create their counter ads. Some groups opted to use our materials, while others brought in materials from home (wood, wire, metal, medicine bottles, fabric, among other objects). Teachers presented their ads to the whole group. The 90 teachers in this study produced 19 counter ads which constitute the data used in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data consisted of the counter ads (N=19) created by teachers and fieldnotes taken during the discussions of these ads. Eleven of the counter ads spoke directly to one or more of the professional advertisements we had presented, and eight groups chose ads in the magazines that we supplied. Teachers repackaged social issues including the military, beauty myth, fast foods, big corporations, and fashion.

In general, researchers analyzed the data independently using VDA paying particular attention to the visual structures in the counter ads, the messages that counter ads spoke to and against, how teachers used art elements and principles of design to orient readings by viewers, and what teachers said about their counter ads. After these initial and independent attempts at coding and analysis, we met together and shared our findings. When one of us coded a response or finding that the other did not, we returned to the data set, reread them collectively, and discussed whether or not this finding could be confirmed.

Specifically, the first layer of analysis involved the organization of counter ads into “picture subject” or what the ad addressed (e.g., big corporations, army, fast food, beauty). This allowed us to answer one of our questions, What messages or companies do teachers talk back to when they create counter ads in response to the everyday world of advertisements? It also allowed us to see the discourses that were being disrupted (e.g., patriotism, fast food), and to what extent teachers were semiotically expressing multiple perspectives. To answer our overarching question, To what extent can teachers talk back to messages of consumerism by creating their own counter ads?, we paid close attention to the physical elements teachers included in their counter ads, the size of objects (emphasis, importance), colors (aesthetics, symbol), and which elements in the original ad were used or altered. We used these same data and the location of objects in the counter ads (quadrants of information) to answer our second

question, How do they critically repackage their advertisement to speak back to messages of consumerism? In this analysis, we identified what values were placed upon the objects and messages (as evident in object placement), the systems of meanings were being taken for granted, which were being challenged, and which ones were being ignored, or left uninterrogated. To answer our fourth question, What do teachers' interpretations of advertisements and their counter ads offer educators as insight for creating curriculum?, we studied which messages and companies teachers most often spoke against, how visual and written text functioned in each ad, and what problems teachers created for themselves as they went about creating their counter ads.

Findings

Several key findings emerged from our analysis.

Teachers, in large part, were successful in speaking back to the systems of meaning that operate in advertisements. All 19 counter ads addressed important social issues, 11 of which took up and talked back to the social issues presented in the ads we presented to them while eight of the 19 ads addressed social issues that transcended the issues that were raised in any one of the individual ads we asked them to read. These 8 counter ads instead focused on broader social issues such as our disposable society, everyone's right to make their own decisions, the U.S. as a fast food nation, homelessness, and the importance of truth in advertising. For example, the beauty myth, which was addressed in two of these 8 counter ads, associated beauty as having unrecognized costs in terms of money, low self-esteem, and drugs. One counter ad suggested that no woman could live up to "Dove women" standards. As an after thought, the creators of this counter ad also addressed the issue of sexism by asking, "Where's the Dove boy?" These data are quite different from those reported by Felderman (2008) working

with elementary-aged children and Vander Zanden (2008) working with preservice teachers. When asked to create counter ads, these researchers reported that elementary and preservice teachers rarely spoke back to the larger social issues that were present in the advertisements, and never produced a counter ad that was not directly related to one of the original ads they were asked to read.

Teachers were more successful in speaking out against some advertisements than others. Teachers were found to be the most

effective in speaking back to military and fast food advertisements. Figure 2 is a direct reference to a largely black and white military ad we presented.

The father in this ad is in the background, and looks at his son who is positioned in the foreground, directly looking at the viewer. Both wear baseball caps and flannel shirts. The caption



Figure 2. Counter ad, military.

for this army recruitment ad reads, “You’d always hoped he’d run with the right crowd, but did you ever think he’d be leading it?” Figure 2 [Insert Figure 2 about here] is read left to right, and presents a story of fallen soldiers, represented by eight pine coffins (popsicle sticks) decorated with red poppies. Located in the bottom of the text—the real area of the canvas—teachers repackaged the original written text on a red background to read, “You always hoped he would end up running with the right crowd, but did you ever think he’d end up in a coffin?” Collectively, they used a variety of art and written language elements to get their message across to the viewer: the repetition of coffins; poppies as adornment for the military dead (the flower associated with U.S.A. veterans and those who died in war); a catchy play on words from the

original ad); and the icons of young men (blue collar workers) who might be attracted to the military as a career. Read together, these elements interrogate the original message, and suggest a troubling result—what happens to sons when they join the army? The message these teachers wanted to send through their counter ad indicated that joining the army, rather than signaling opportunity, signified war and death. Teachers clearly repackaged this ad to convey their impassioned anti-war sentiments.

Ads that conveyed a lifestyle, such as those presented by Ralph Lauren or Walmart’s line of Barbie clothes, were less easily spoken against. Figure 3 [Insert Figure 3 about here] was a counter ad created in response to Ralph Lauren’s (RL) ad for children’s clothing. The ad has a vertical orientation, read from top-to-bottom, with the intention of presenting information (Author, 2008). The ad invites viewers to “IMAGINE” this child’s experiences. Because of its size and volume, the eye immediately moves to “Imagine” and then is drawn downward toward the cut-out picture of the girl in the original ad which this group of teachers integrated into their counter ad. The middle section of the canvas reveals an imagined and simplified lifestyle, a young innocent girl playing on the beach, complete with beach ball, sand pail, shovel, and a dog. Unlike “IMAGINE,” the written text at the bottom, “If I Could Be A Kid?”, anchors the message in casual print, much like the sweater casually thrown around the shoulders of the young girl in the original ad. The question mark positions the viewer to wonder whether the lifestyle depicted in the original Ralph Lauren ad is really the lifestyle we ought to seek as ideal for kids. Rather,

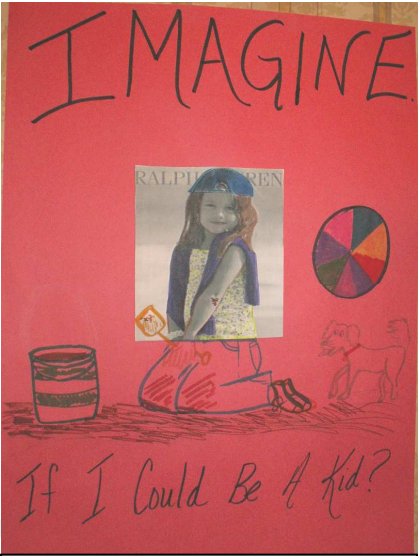


Figure 3. Counter ad, Ralph Lauren.

they repackage a lifestyle that positions the RL model in a social and public beach that allows dogs, and kneeling in the sand and getting dirty. Unlike the war ad, this group of teachers appeared to be less able to repackage discourses of exclusivity and wealth. Their child is also the Ralph Lauren child. Not all children have puppies, live near or vacation at a beach, or have parents with the where-with-all to go to the beach. This girl even has all the right sand toys. Interestingly, although they did speak against the written text, they were less able to disrupt the very geographic space that only a few children are privileged to experience.

Teachers were successful in arranging the visual and linguistic elements in their texts to position viewers to read the message they wished to convey. Teachers integrated the knowledge they learned about visual grammar and visual discourse analysis to successfully position viewers to read the message they wished to convey.

This suggests that teachers understood visual grammar, and intentionally located elements to reproduce similar arrangements found in professional ads. As shown in Figure 4

[Insert Figure 4 about here], teachers of this ad wrote the text

“Have YOU had a Mac Attack LATELY?” in bold black permanent magic marker and placed it in the ideal area of the canvas. Their message speaks against McDonald’s original tag line, “Have you had a Mac attack lately?” By situating their

written text as the ideal position, their counter ad positions the viewer to read their ironic play on the word “attack” as an EKG line, initially alive but then flatlines. Their message suggests that if consumers choose to eat unhealthy foods, such as the Big Mac, they risk a heart attack and death. Their ad, much like original McDonald’s ads, positions the viewer to see and, perhaps, desire the

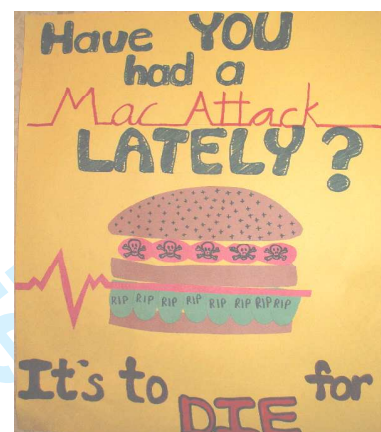


Figure 4. Counter ad, fast food.

Big Mac. However, when viewed closely, the tomato is comprised of skull and crossbones, and lettuce by RIP gravestones. Metaphorically and literally, teachers repackage this ad to position the viewer to read the Big Mac as unhealthy. By so doing, teachers are successful in using art elements and visual grammar to send their message that the Big Mac is not a complete meal, but a heart attack waiting to happen. The written text, "It's to Die for," is placed at the bottom, the real; there is nothing tentative about this repackaged message. The repetition of elements (e.g., skull and crossbones, cardiogram lines, R.I.P.), the use of color, and their use of written text, operate semiotically to make this counter ad very effective in repackaging a strong and critical message about fast food and health.

Teachers pragmatically position viewers as persons who believe what they believe.

Pragmatics is defined as the rules of language that operate in a context of situation (Halliday, 1975). That is, how language and visual elements are orchestrated depends on the meaning that will be made as well as what meaning is assumed. In a counter ad speaking against fast foods, teachers invited their viewers to "spread the word," that fast foods are high in carbohydrates, sugar, sodium and saturated fats. The use of the phrase "spread the word" assumed that viewers of the ad already knew this phrase and all that was needed was to get the word out to others. In another counter ad that addressed Lysol, the creators seemed to assume that everyone knew that companies use scare tactics to sell products. They used the slogan, "If you are not rinsing off with Lie's All, you could die" with a picture of the original ad in the corner. In so doing, they acted as if the ad spoke for itself, thereby suggesting that it was common knowledge that when reading ads one must question the veracity of what is being said. Another counter ad took on banks and insurance companies suggesting that they do not – as everyone knows – have your personal interests at heart. In a counter ad questioning the tendency

of advertisers to cater to youth, the creators of yet another counter ad suggested that we not forget that 1.5 million children are living on the street.

Counter ads reflect consumer discourses to which teachers identified and represented through visual language. Our analysis showed that the discourses with which teachers aligned themselves became clear in the counter ads that they created, including the very discourses to which they spoke against. As a previous finding suggested, teachers were able to speak against some ads more than others. When the ad featured a lifestyle to which they could relate, teachers were less critical. In their ads, they often integrated similar art and design



Figure 5. Counter ad, Walmart/Barbie Line of Clothes.

elements that seem to promote the very discourse that they were speaking against. That is, their counter ads were critical, but less complex in light of the many underlying issues that might have helped them create a stronger counter argument. Figure 5 [Insert Figure 5 about here] is a counter ad that speaks against two ads we showed them, a Ralph Lauren ad and a Walmart ad. Both of these ads present

young girls who enjoy the life that results from their beauty, exclusivity in terms of money and career, clothes, and enviable spaces available to them (e.g., beaches, runways). In this counter ad, teachers spoke to parents directly and to the discourse of conformity explicitly in the primary message, “Let Your Daughter Walk...Her Own Runway.” Further, they direct the viewer to understand what young girls should do, using subliminal messages written behind the more bolded text: “Learn,” “Do,” “Play,” and “Dream.” However, the discourses of beauty,

exclusivity, economics, among others, were left unaddressed. In essence, even though they attempted to speak against messages of consumerism driven by aforementioned discourses, they picked up several of these discourses in their own counter ad. Visually, teachers integrated several art and design elements that position individuality in a similar way to the original ad. Teachers integrated the photo from the original ad, embellished it with decoration and glitter, and used colored markers and large print to suggest that young girl's individuality will be achieved through this same lifestyle. Further, the ad suggests that parents should encourage their young girls to develop a strong body image, offer them choice, and be "real and not plastic" (a reference to the Barbie doll itself). In this way, their "Daughters" will walk their own runway. However, the use of decorative art elements supports the discourse of what it means to be pretty, beautiful and to have the glamorous life of the Walmart Barbie fashion models.

A critical analysis of this counter ad led us to conclude that teachers struggled to speak against, or repackage, the discourse of what constitutes being female and, specifically, a beautiful female who is in an enviable position—the position of a model with a glamorous life. Through their inability to rotate a social issue through multiple perspectives, teachers ended up responding to effects rather than causes, and all too often ended up supporting the very lifestyle they were trying to talk against.

Discussion

If it is true that teachers can only do for students what they first can do for themselves, then this study demonstrates that it is important that teachers, like their students, become consciously aware of how visual media operates to reify and reproduce messages within ads. This study offers evidence that everyday texts must be part of a critical literacy curriculum, and we suggest in teacher education as well, in which these texts are positioned as significant in how

we see ourselves, and the lifestyles that we can imagine. When everyday texts are unpacked and read with an informed eye, educators, along with their students, can become consciously aware of how texts mean and how elements within a text operate together to produce particular meanings, and position viewers to read texts in particular ways. Such engagements as repackaging texts demonstrates that learning to read visual images is important, as is attempting to speak back to these advertisements once they have been read. This study provides evidence that teachers benefited from the study of visual images and their understanding of the work they did and the grammar or structure by which such work gets done.

This study also speaks to the lure of ads and the building of desire in consumers. That teachers could easily speak against ads like McDonald's (Figures 1, 4) or the military (Figure 2) suggested that they did not desire this lifestyle for themselves or for those who eat fast food or are recruited to serve in the military. That they could not speak as easily against Walmart, Disney, and Ralph Lauren suggests that the advertisers are marketing their products in more creative ways, ways that tell stories of lovely and uncluttered lifestyles, or lifestyles of glamour and recognition. These are stories in which viewers—like some of these teachers--could imagine for themselves or for their children. In fact, they, as Schor (2004) suggests, might even work those longer hours so that their children can have these lifestyles. Further, Buckingham's (2007) argument that media presents a homogenized childhood came through even in the counter ads that teachers produced. That is, even when repackaging ads as represented by Figure 4, teachers were enticed by those products that presented a lifestyle that was pleasant, unfettered, and desired. We suggest that teachers must have multiple experiences reading media texts, and have opportunities to produce and talk to and about these texts. In so doing, they will be more able to

develop critical practices that interrogate the messages conveyed and become aware of the desires evoked when reading such ads and the lifestyles that they promote and encourage.

Teachers' knowledge of how ads work, especially as this knowledge relates to positioning viewers to read in particular ways, is particularly significant in a critical literacy language arts program. First, unlike written language which is most often read along linear lines, visual language has flexibility in where and how elements are located, their size and volume, how they are repeated, and so on. Together the orchestration of these elements can direct a viewer's eyes, and thus support meaning making in unique ways. It is important that teachers become consciously aware of how visual texts are read so they may use this information in creating counter statements, and be alert to how they support particular readings and hence particular ideologies (all of which need to be unpacked and some of which they may wish to perpetuate).

Significant to the previous point is the critical importance that we must place on knowing, studying, and understanding the role of structures, elements and discourses that play out in visual texts of all types. In so doing, visual language, like written language, can become a language of critique, especially against messages that serve large corporations and their own interests (Authors, 2011). Even though the program in which these teachers were enrolled was grounded in critical literacy, in part, some were less able to use art consciously to produce and visually to convey messages that spoke against consumerism. These teachers had had multiple experiences disrupting and talking back to issues in print-based texts, but less with visual texts. This suggests to us that teachers, like young children, are less familiar with talking about and talking against visual information or texts that contain visual images. We argue that this study provides evidence that critical analysis of all texts, regardless of how we might consider them

less significant (Marsh, 2006), must be a regular part of literacy curricula and teacher education. Teachers must have experiences discussing not only processes of reading written text, for example, but they must also have experiences discussing processes of reading visual text. In so doing, they can then bring this analysis into their own classrooms. Adults and children alike are immersed in a world where visual information is everywhere (e.g., images in textbooks, posters on classroom walls, sketches, ads, billboards,, mascots etc.), and we suggest that teachers and their students must be equipped to understand messages that underpin this information. This work must become a regular part of the language arts program, and like other texts, visual texts presented and created in English language arts settings must be interrogated. To be critically literate, teachers and students must be consciously aware of the social and political agendas behind a wide range of visual texts, one of which most certainly must be advertisements given their pervasiveness in our societies.

Conclusion

A picture is defined socially by content as well as by presentation. Said in terms of this study, an advertisement is defined by the cultural codes of the society that employs it, the trace of the tools and materials that form it (what Bryson [1983] called the “deictic reference” of the artist who executes it), the medium in which it may be transmitted, and the language it incorporates. Ads, therefore, not only contain mediated, rational meaning, but also social, cultural, and expressive meaning. The counter ads produced in the course of this study are as much about the teachers who produced them as they are about the advertisements they interrogate or talk back to. Because we are all first consumers of advertisements, it follows that what we know about advertisements – and for that matter what we know about how to use them to talk back – has been learned at the hand of the enemy, so to speak. This insight convinces us

that it is even more imperative that we teach students and teachers to talk back to texts, including the texts we invite them to create in the English language arts classroom. That the teachers in this study were as successful as they were in talking back to consumerism is hopeful and supports our argument as to why it is important that we feature both visual literacy and critical literacy in the English language arts classroom. What happened here was not accidental but rather the result of an ongoing curriculum designed to support teachers in taking a critical stance toward literacy.

For Peer Review

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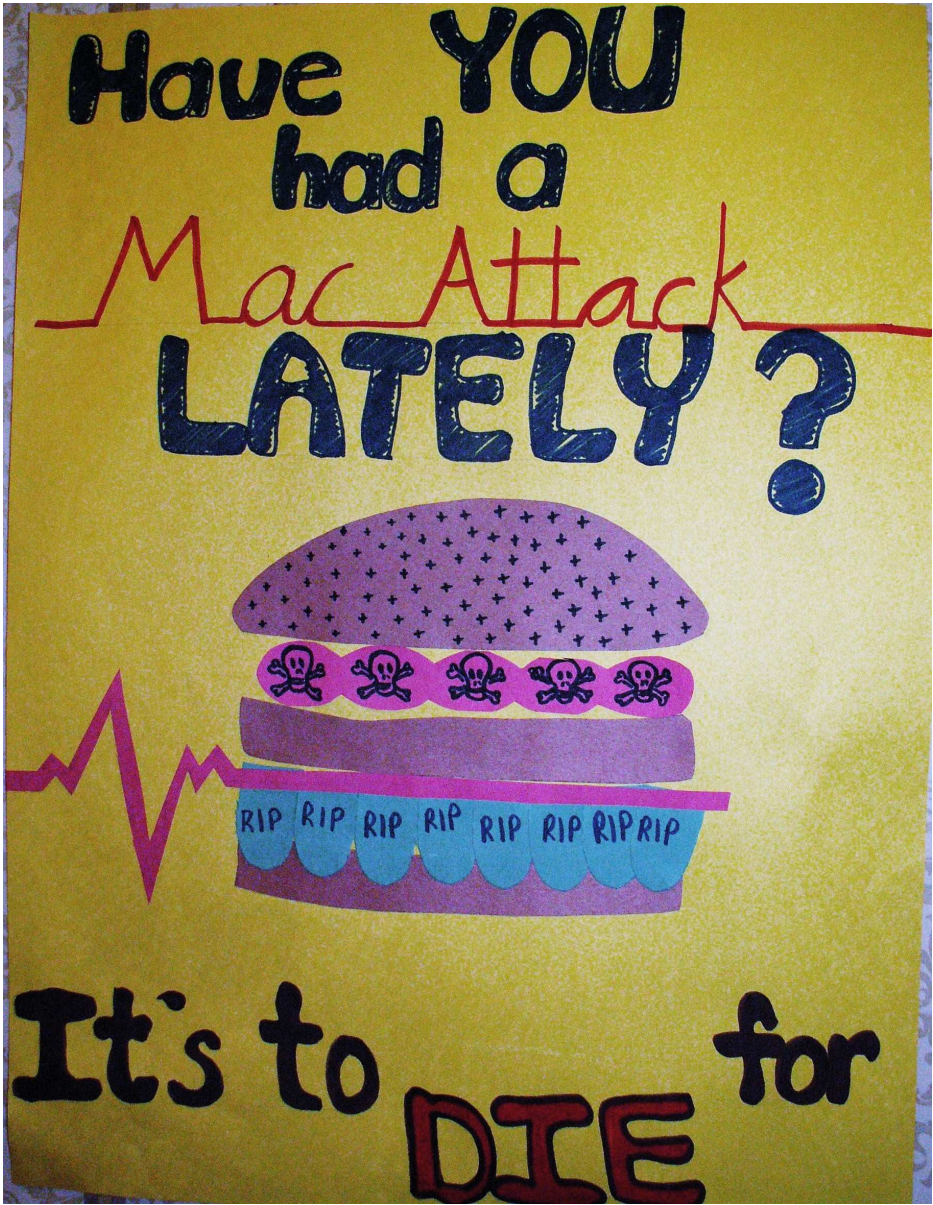
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