

The Effects of Print Advertising and Television Commercials on Teenagers

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## ABSTRACT

### The Effects of Print Advertising and Television Commercials on Teenagers

Isa Tozzi

This study explores the effects that print advertising and television commercials have on teenagers and how education plays a role in this consumer culture. This exploratory study is based on one session with a focus group of six students from a public high school in Laval, Quebec. Three of the students are male and three are female.

The study is based on three activities completed during the focus group. The first activity was students responding to a questionnaire regarding their media related spending habits. The second activity was to view and analyze a variety of print advertisements. Lastly, students were asked to complete an analysis of five television commercials. The results point to the fact that advertising does have an effect on teenagers and that education must play a role in helping students become critical thinkers in order to make sense of this phenomenon that is literally all around them. Suggestions on how to achieve this as well as further research are discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank all of the students for their participation. I would also like to thank Mino Derayeh for reawakening my passion for media studies. Special thanks to Joyce Barakett for your constant support and positivity.

To my friends and family: “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try, sometimes well you might find you get what you need”

Rolling Stones

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of print advertising and television commercials on teenagers in grade nine and ten. More specifically, I focus on how these forms of advertising play a role in their purchasing choices, how they see themselves and those around them. I then argue that education must play a greater role in addressing this issue of adolescent consumerism. My intentions were not to confirm the correlation between advertising and students' purchasing habits but rather to explore advertising's various effects and to address the issue that media studies are crucial to raise the awareness of students' unconscious desire to consume. This is an exploratory study based on interviews with students from a prominent high school located in Laval, Quebec which is part of the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board. It is a high school which only offers grade nine to eleven. For grades seven to eight, students usually attend the middle school that is located right next door. The school population consists of 938 students which I loosely refer to as middle to upper class. The staff is made up of fifty-one full-time teachers also middle to upper class. Thirty out of the fifty-one teachers are female. Both the school population and staff size will grow significantly as there is a drastic increase in enrollments in their feeder school for the coming school year 2005-2006.

This is a public high school where the majority of the students are of Italian and Greek heritage. The economic background of the school is important to note. Many of the students drive to school in expensive luxury cars and sport the latest fashions. For some, these items were purchased by parents who want their children to have what they never

had, for many others, they hold part-time jobs which often take precedence over their school work so that they can afford to drive to school in a fancy car or purchase the latest fashions. “A recent study by Laval University found that their sample group of rich and poor kids had an equal and unquenchable thirst for designer clothes” (Quart, 2003, p.6) It is also important to note that this high school is located within a five minute walk of the Carrefour Laval, a posh middle-upper class shopping mall where most students spend their lunch hour, hang out after school, and even hold part-time jobs.

The focus of the study is on two types of advertisement: print advertising and television commercials. The data collected address the need of being able to read and analyze these forms of media as part of the school curriculum. Suggestions as to how this can occur and further research are discussed. My goal was to investigate how print advertisement and television commercials play a role in shaping adolescents’ identities, their views about themselves and others, their feelings of self-worth. Another concern was to address what influences their purchase choices and how these create the illusion of freedom to choose, and create unnecessary needs and desires, sexual stereotyping and restrictive sex-roles. Within my study I examine various perspectives that help to explain consumer culture. I discuss the methodology which I used; that is interviews with a focus group of six students (three male and three female) as well as an advertisement analysis activity which determined how much students already know, how media literate they are, and how critical their thinking is. I analyze my findings and compare them to the diverse theories of consumer culture. Lastly, I provide a conclusion and present suggestions for further research.



Teenagers have become one of the largest groups of consumers of goods and services because of their impressionability and possession of disposable income. “American children 6-14 years old are of increasing interest to marketers because they are believed to have about \$6 billion in discretionary income” (Berger, 2000, p. 96) . For the purpose of this study the participants are adolescents in grade nine and ten since they are part of the largest group of consumers.

## CHAPTER I

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines various studies focusing on advertising and consumer culture. The aim of this review is to build a base for implementing important concepts into the curriculum in order to aid high school students ranging from grades 9-12 in becoming media literate and critical thinkers.

#### **Defining Consumer Culture**

Before going any further, it would seem fitting to define consumer culture. According to Asa Berger (2000), Professor of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University, consumer cultures are

those in which there has been a great expansion of commodity production, leading to societies full of consumer goods and services and places where these consumer goods and services can be purchased. In consumer cultures, the “game” people play is “get as much as you can”. Success is defined as being the person “who has the most toys”. This leads to a lust for consuming products and conspicuously displaying them as a means of demonstrating that one is a success and ultimately, that one is worthy. The very act of consumption has now also become aestheticized and sexualized and is itself the source of a great deal of pleasure (p.23) .

Consumer culture is largely tied in with popular culture; a question arises here as brought to our attention by Strinati (1995). Strinati asks: Where does popular culture come from? Does it come from the people themselves as an autonomous expression of their interests and modes of experience or is it imposed from above by those in positions of power as a

type of social control? In the case of consumers, those in positions of power would be those who are in charge of advertising and the people who in turn govern them: the product makers. In the case of adolescents one would have to say that popular culture comes from a combination of both the adolescents themselves and those that impose it upon them, i.e. advertisers, celebrity spokespeople etc. A second concern raised by Strinati is whether popular culture is used to “indoctrinate people, to get them to accept and adhere to ideas and values which ensure the continued dominance of those in more privileged positions who thus exercise power over them? Or is it about rebellion and opposition to the prevailing social order?” (pp.3-4) . In my opinion, it is a combination of both. However, my research shows that most teenagers will purchase whatever they like and not what they are being persuaded to purchase. Nonetheless, another question arises, where do adolescents form their opinions of what they must purchase and what they can do without? They are not as in control as they may believe they are. The influences can be at an unconscious level as well as at a conscious one, and these influences can come from anywhere including their peers, their celebrity idols, or the various tactics aggressive advertising companies use.

### **Defining Advertising as Print and Television Commercials**

The role of advertising is to entice us to consume. Advertising is defined by Berger (2000). He states that advertising tries to

attract the attention, create the desire for, and stimulate action that leads to the purchase of products and services advertised on the part of those reading print advertisement, listening to radio commercials, or watching and listening to

television commercials. That is advertisers hope to convince, to persuade, to motivate and most importantly to get people to act, to do something (p.4) .

Print and television commercial advertisements address particular populations. For the purposes of this research I am focusing on ads that target teenage audiences. The products themselves can appear to be quite mundane but the advertisements for them use various techniques to get the viewer's attention. Many of these ads use sex, illegal activity and cleverly masked profanity. The advertisements used in the focus group to study the topic include all of these techniques and are included in Appendix B pp.79-89.

### **Needs vs Desires**

In earlier days, consumption was mostly limited to a small number of wealthy individuals. According to Strinati (1995), mass culture is popular culture which is produced by mass production industrial techniques and is marketed for a profit to a mass public of consumers. It is industrialization and urbanization which gave rise to the mass-marketing campaigns we are familiar with today. Naomi Klein (2000) gives her readers a concise history of the beginning of the brand. She also makes a differentiation between branding and advertising which I will adhere to as well in this study. According to Klein advertising, which began in the second half of the nineteenth century, was more about advertising than it was about branding. "Think of the brand as the core meaning of the modern corporation and of the advertisement as one vehicle used to convey that meaning to the world" (p.5) . In the second half of the nineteenth century, advertisers were faced with a variety of new inventions. Their job was to convince consumers that they needed these new inventions i.e. radios, cars, light bulbs, etc., and that these products would make consumers's lives easier. Many of these new inventions bore brand names but that

was not the initial concern. “The first brand-based product appeared at around the same time as the invention-based ads, largely because of another relatively recent invention: the factory” (p.5) . When goods were being produced in factories, not only were new products being introduced but there were also old products with new appearances.

Competitive branding became a necessity of the machine age-within a context of manufactured sameness, image-based difference had to be manufactured along with the product. So the role of advertising changed from delivering product news bulletins to building an image around a particular brand-name version of a product (p.6) .

The first task that branding accomplished was to give brand names to generic products such as sugar, flour, soap and cereal which had previously been scooped out of barrels by local shopkeepers. “In the 1880s, corporate logos were introduced to mass-produced products like Campbell’s Soup, H.J. Heinz pickles and Quaker Oats cereal” (Klein, 2000, p.6) . What advertising has done is open up the consumer mentality to include the middle and lower classes. Within consumer cultures, people measure their worth not by what they have but by what they do not have. This is in part because advertising is always reminding us about what we do not have. Once our essential needs have been met we become obsessed by what we do not have but want and desire.

What advertising does is play upon these factors and tries to convince you that their product or service will bring you directly to a level of self-transcendence.

Advertising manufactures and shapes desire and thus creates people who are insatiable and who have been conditioned to continually lust for more things. And the more we have the more we want. Because the things we buy-the sports utility

vehicles, the expensive vacations, the trophy wives and husbands- are evidence that we believe of our intelligence, industry, potency and ultimately, our worth (Berger, 2000, p. 29) .

Early advertising was for the most part scientific whereas it used specific formulas to achieve its finished product. There were guidelines such as, never mention rivals, use declarative statements only and use large dark headlines with lots of white space. However, as Klein (2000) notes there were those who understood that “advertising wasn’t just scientific; it was also spiritual. Brands could conjure a feeling – think of Aunt Jemima’s comforting presence- but not only that, entire corporations could themselves embody a meaning of their own i.e. General Motors- something personal, warm and human” (pp.6-7) .

By the end of the 1940s there was an awareness that a brand was not just a catchphrase or a picture printed on the label of a company’s product; the company as a whole could have a brand identity or a “corporate consciousness, as this ephemeral quality was termed at the time” (Klein, 2000, p.6) . It took many decades for the production world to adjust to this change. It held on to the idea that production came first and then branding was an important bonus. According to Klein, the defining moment for brand equity came in 1988 when Philip Morris purchased Kraft for \$12.6 billion -six times what the company was worth on paper. The price difference, apparently, was the cost of the word “Kraft”. With the purchase of Kraft a huge dollar value had been given to – a brand name. This was wonderful news for the ad world that could now claim that the more a company would spend in advertising the more profit they would make. In 1998, ad spending in the U.S. was at \$196.5 billion, while global ad spending is estimated

at \$435 billion. This is proof of the widely held belief that brands need constant advertising in order to make profit.

Advertisers see today's state of commercial bombardment as a reason for more persuasive and intrusive commercials that will stand out above all the rest. In order for this to occur, clients must spend more money. The typical rate for a 30-second timeslot for an advertisement to air during the "Super Bowl" is \$1,500,000. To have your advertisement air during CBS's Evening News \$55,000 to air during CNN's Headline News \$3,000 (Lasn, 1999, p.184) . Commercial time slots declined from 60 seconds to 30 seconds and recently to 15 seconds and even shorter. With these short time slots there was a need for commercials to stand out and grab a hold of our attention. The speed up of these advertisements has two major consequences: firstly "it has the effect of drawing the viewer into the message and secondly, speed and fragmentation are not particularly conducive to thinking they induce feeling" (Jhally, 1990, p.84) .

René Girard (1991), a French literary theorist presents a theory about why we consume things. Girard believes that what we desire is what others desire and "mimetic desire" means we imitate their desire whether it is for material possessions or marriage partners. We have all had the experience where we had something, took it for granted and then wanted it back when it was either taken away or being enjoyed by someone else. This type of behavior is conducive to adults leading unhappy and unfulfilling lives. As teachers, we can aid our students in their formative years in order for them to live happier more fulfilling lives as adults. By fostering dialogue and aiding students to discover this knowledge they can be in a better position when faced with consumer culture. This goal can be attained by being media literate and a critical thinker.

Naomi Klein (2000) notes that in the early 1990s there was a bargain craze that brought fear to the name brands. Suddenly, companies were reducing their prices rather than putting the money into extravagant ad campaigns. This led to an overall advertising spending decrease of about 5.5 % in 1991 as noted by Naomi Klein. It was the first decrease since the 1970s. However, there were brands that were not participating in the reduction of their prices, and they continued to choose marketing over value. These brands were: Nike, Apple, The Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Disney, Levi's and Starbucks. Not only were these brands doing well but branding was becoming an even larger part of their business plan.

Unlike classic household brand names like Tide and Marlboro, these logos weren't losing their currency; they were in the midst of breaking every barrier in the marketing world- becoming cultural accessories and lifestyle philosophers. These companies didn't wear their image like a cheap shirt- their image was so integrated with their business that other people wore it as *their* shirt. And when the brands crashed, these companies didn't even notice- they were branded to the bone (Klein, 2000, p. 16) .

Companies were now increasing their spending on lifestyle marketing, they were using ads to associate their lines with risqué art and progressive politics. "Advertisers saw that consumers had become too jaded and media savvy to respond to mere sexual titillation or intellectual games. The new shock ads go straight to the soul" (Lasn, 1999, p. 22) . It is interesting to note that the products barely appeared in the ads not to mention the prices. Some examples of these advertisements are: Benetton's dying AIDS patients and Absolut Vodka's ads where all one sees is a blank bottle-shaped space that can be



filled with whatever content a particular audience most wants from its brand (the content of the space changes depending on what magazine is featuring the ad).

Advertising has always been about using imagery to equate products with positive cultural or social experiences. The effect if not always the original intent, of advanced branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star. It is not to sponsor culture but to *be* the culture. And why shouldn't it be? If brands are not products but ideas, attitudes, values, experiences, why can't they be culture too? (Klein, 2000, p.30) .

Whether we like it or not brands have in fact become a part of our culture. On a simplistic level most people will ask for some Kleenex instead of some tissue paper. On a more complex level, we have become a culture that strives to fulfill needs that have been fabricated by those trying to sell us what will fulfill these fabricated needs.

### **The Illusion of Control**

There is an illusion that many young people have and it is that they are completely in control of their purchasing habits and that they are aware of advertising but that in the end it does not affect them. According to Strinati (1995), "major television institutions operate to control their audiences by treating them as objects of discourses. They construct and produce knowledge about their audiences in order to control them in line with their institutional requirements" (pp.250-251) . Strinati also notes that followers of Marxist theory believe that media organizations "operate as channels for a dominant ideology or expressions of the demands of profitability" (p.251) . Carl Jung wrote in *Man and his Symbols* "many people mistakenly overestimate the role of will power and think that nothing can happen to their minds that they do not decide or intend. But we must

learn carefully to discriminate between intentional and unintentional contents of the mind” (cited in Berger, 2000, p.47) . There are different levels to the human psyche. There is consciousness, preconsciousness and the unconscious. The unconscious level is of interest to us here because something can be in our minds without us being aware of it. Keeping Jung’s (1996) ideas in mind, there is a large possibility that advertising reaches its target audience at an unconscious level, especially when one considers the amount of advertising that we are all subjected to on any given day.

The National Association of Broadcasters’ Television Code limits the number of commercials permitted on television to 9.5 minutes per hour during prime time and 16 minutes an hour during other times. Since the currently preferred length of a single TV spot is 30 seconds, the number of spots per hour averages from 19 to 32. The largest percentage of television viewing occurs during prime time, but if we average, 19 and 32, we arrive at a figure of 25.5 spots per hour. On the average, each American sees 156 spots a day, or 1092 spots a week (Berger, 2000, p.41) .

With figures such as these it seems even more thought provoking that advertisement may be affecting us at some unconscious level of our human psyche.

Advertisements are the most prevalent and toxic of the mental pollutants. From the moment your radio alarm sounds in the morning to the wee hours of late-night TV, micro jolts of commercial pollution flood into your brain at the rate of about three thousand marketing messages per day. Every day, an estimated 12 billion display ads, 3 million radio commercials, and more than 200 000 TV commercials are dumped into North America’s collective unconscious. Corporate advertising

(or is it the commercial media?) is the largest single psychological project ever undertaken by the human race. Yet for all of that, its impact on us remains unknown and largely ignored. (Lasn, 1999, pp.18-19) .

One may feel that when it comes time to make a purchase one decides who will get their hard earned dollar and that the decision was ultimately one's own. However, in this day and age do we really take the time to find out where our products are coming from? Do we consider whether a nine year old child made our t-shirt instead of going to school? Do we consider that the child probably got a few cents for the t-shirt that just cost us fifty dollars? If society was more aware of where their money went, and the effect it was having, perhaps this would make a difference and big multinational corporations would have to stop and listen. Many feel that as one person alone they cannot make a difference. It is this self-defeating attitude that keeps us locked in our own chains. Perhaps many feel that with such a wide array of stores out there, there really is choice and one really does decide where they purchase their products. Klein (2000) states that "There is an assault on choice. It is taking place on several different fronts at once. It is happening structurally, with mergers, buyouts and corporate synergies. It is happening locally, with a handful of super brands using their huge cash reserves to force out small and independent businesses" (p.130) .

Companies like Starbucks have found new and innovative ways to squash the little companies around them. One may have noticed these companies sprouting like weeds. They tend to open in close proximity to one another, leaving the consumer with little choice as to where they will purchase their coffee. They choose their locations by

studying the area's market for competitors. When they find a competitor that is doing well they approach the property's landlord and offer them more rent.

Instead of opening a few stores in every city in the world, or even North America, Starbucks waits till it can blitz an entire area and spread. It's a highly aggressive strategy, and it involves something the company calls "cannibalization". The idea is to saturate an area with stores until the coffee competition is so fierce that sales drop even in individual Starbucks outlets (Klein, 2000, p.136) .

The recipe that has made Wal-Mart the largest retailer in the world is to build stores two to three times bigger than your competitors and fill them with such large quantities of merchandise that you can afford to sell items for much less than your competitor, not to mention the smaller no-name businesses.

I wanted to know if teenagers are aware of these issues. It is interesting to know what values are important to adolescents when it comes to making purchases. Would knowing where the product came from or who was exploited in order for us to purchase it make any difference? The answer here clearly depends on who is answering the question. According to my research, these factors are not important to all teenagers. In fact some will buy products knowing fully well that it was produced by an exploited child laborer.

Why the love of brand names? For many, a brand says a lot about who they are and where they stand in life. Moses (2000) found that "because young people's identity is so tentative, having the right brands is a way of telegraphically belonging to the right group" (p.27). She further notes that "teens love brands. Brands delight. Brands provide a badge of identity. Brands are enablers. Brands are passports to global culture. Brands are

tickets to success. Brands embody all the good values that life has to offer: fun, attractiveness, and opportunity for a better life” (pp.11-12).

Moses surveyed teens all over the world and found that there are unifiers (factors that make teens the same) and differentiators (factors that make teens different). These factors vary depending on a teen’s cultural heritage, family values, etc. It is important to note that Moses’s book is written from the perspective of a marketing professional who is giving tips to others on how to profit from the teen market.

These are her unifiers:

1. Unabashed consumerism
2. Passion for technology
3. Perpetual entertainment
4. Endless experience and learning
5. Exploration and mobility
6. Sports participation and observation
7. Respect for global icons
8. Humanism and empathy
9. Hope and trust in the future
10. Self-navigation- the ultimate unifier (p.37)

Her differentiators are as follows:

1. Local economic realities
2. Worries
3. Love and sex
4. Drugs and drinking
5. Technological access
6. Responsibilities and pressures
7. Local pride
8. Values (p.63)

It is unfortunate to know that there are books out there to help others try and profit from our young. Nonetheless, freedom of speech is very important and is what our country is built on. However, the importance of our teens being media literate becomes more apparent with all of the issues that have been discussed at this point. On a more

positive note, adolescents are not just impressionable beings that need to be protected from the “big, bad marketers”. Many teens are rebellious, anti-authority trend setters and marketers are very well aware of this. Hence, the “cool hunters”, these are teens hired by companies to tell them if their products are cool. Klein (2000) refers to them as “cool hunters” and Quart (2003) calls them “teen consultants”. They are compensated with not only money but freebies made by the companies that the teens will wear which will in turn provide free advertising for the companies since these products are, more often than not, branded. Both authors agree that these teens are being exploited but not in the same way as the nine year old making shoes for Nike.

### **Adolescents, Sex and Advertising**

The exploitation of the human body for advertising is a common critique of the advertising field that we have heard time and time again. Women and men are made into sex objects to sell anything from cars (i.e. Mini® car ad where a threesome is shown to convince potential buyers of how big the car really is) to shampoos (i.e. Herbal Essence’s ® campaign which showcases women having orgasms just by washing their hair). Sexuality, sexual desire, sexual lust, and even sexual intercourse are omnipresent in today’s advertising. If it is able to make grown men and women feel less attractive because they are trying to live up to impossible standards, then how does it affect today’s adolescents? This is a question I address in my research and which I analyze in my findings using what my sample of adolescents had to say. How does sex in advertising play a role in their purchasing choices, how they see themselves and those around them? According to my focus group, sex is no longer a meaningful act which two people engage in who love each other. As one student pointed out “Sex is just something you do.” The

only explanation for this is that we are saturated with sexual images to such an extent that we have become desensitized and detached with its meaningfulness.

Going back to the idea of advertising affecting us on an unconscious level, images of sexuality are often used in a subliminal more discreet way where we may not even be aware of the sexual images that we are being bombarded with; for example, Joe Camel, the cartoon camel representative of Camel ® cigarettes. If one looks closely at the camel, one will notice his long straight snout bulges from above two pouch-like folds clearly representing a phallic symbol.

### **Types of Teenage Consumers**

“In 1998, there were almost 30 million teenagers living in America and in 1997 these teenagers spent around \$4 billion on clothing, cosmetics and various other kinds of fashion items” (Berger, 2000, p.94) . Most teenage spending is discretionary and not based on essential purchases. Teenage Research Unlimited, a Northbrook, Illinois market research company that specializes in the teenage market has come up with a theory that all teens can fit into one of four categories: Influencers, Edge Group Members, Conformers and Passives. The characteristics of each group introduced by Berger (2000) are as follow:

1. Influencers: They are quick to embrace fashion trends, spend a good deal of money on fashion trends, and influence spending habits of other teenagers.
2. The Edge Group: Members of this group continually change their looks in an attempt to be anti-fashion and drop their fashion looks when influencers adopt them. (As a side note, in Naomi Klein’s *No Logo*, it is mentioned that marketing

companies hire teenagers from this category in order to ensure that their product is “cool”.)

3. Conformers: Most teenagers fall into this category. Conformers use popular brands to strengthen their self-esteem.

4. Passives: Teenagers in this category are not particularly interested in using fashion as a statement or a means of fitting in. They buy clothes based on what is available rather than being concerned about being fashionable (p. 94) .

I asked my sample of adolescents what they think about these four categories, and whether they were able to place themselves in one of the four categories or perhaps even create a new category in which they felt suited them better. I will discuss their responses in my findings and analysis section. Teenagers are not just consumers for themselves; they influence the spending of others around them, including their parents. Again Berger (2000) notes that based on a 1989 study by the Rand Youth Poll teenage girl’s spending habits break down as follows:

Food and snacks	33%
Clothing	20%
Savings	17%
Entertainment and movies	14%
Records	5%
Miscellaneous	5%
Grooming	4%
Hobbies	3%

(p.95) .

I surveyed my sample of adolescent students to find out how their spending habits compared with the findings of the Rand Youth Poll. However, it was not possible for me to compare my findings with those of the Rand Youth Poll because none of the students



gave me actual figures, nor were any of them specific as to what they spend their money on.

### **Advertisement and the Communication Process**

Before I end with how to analyze and interpret print advertisement and television commercials it is important to discuss advertisement and how it is related to the communication process. Harold Lasswell, a political scientist (cited in Berger 2000, p.33) said that to understand the communication process we need to ask the following questions: Who is communicating? What are they communicating? In which channel are they communicating? To whom are they communicating? With what effect are they communicating? These questions in themselves offer educators a good starting point in discussing print advertisement and television commercials, not to mention all other forms of media as well. However, Berger (2000) offers his readers some extensive questions which are useful for teachers and their students in encouraging a more in depth analysis, which will in turn empower students as well as teachers by being critical thinkers as well as media literate.

### **Call to Action/ What is Already Being Done**

Quart (2003) states that:

The Canadian Marketing Association has the Canadian Code of Ethics & Standards of Practice, which contains guidelines such as marketers should exercise caution that they do not take advantage of or exploit teenagers...Marketers shall not use or collect household or personal information from teenagers as a means to gain entry into that teenager's household. Marketers shall not solicit information about a third party from a teenager. Although these

guidelines are mere corporate voluntarism and probably treated with a grain of salt, at least they gesture toward awareness and toward limits (p.229) .

In Quebec, all advertising directed to children under the age of 13 is prohibited under the Quebec Consumer Protection Act. Canadian ads directed at children under 13 follow voluntary guidelines under the Broadcast Code for Advertising to Children. Quart asks: “Why don’t we have such voluntary guidelines in the United States?” (p.230). This is a valid question that we as Canadians should be concerned with as well, since most of the programming Canadian teenagers enjoy viewing is American in origin. Do parents have a role in this? Of course, just as teachers need new lessons in media literacy, parents need to discuss this hyper-marketed culture we live in that manufactures so many unaffordable and unnecessary desires. Quart suggests questions to initiate parent-child discussion, although sarcastic in nature they do scream out for reflection:

How does it feel to grow up in an atmosphere where an eight-year-old boy gets teased for being poor by his friends for not owning a Play Station? How does it feel to be a teen girl who doesn’t eat lunch on weekends in order to save money for clothes, while her friends jump turnstiles and steal credit cards in order to save or boost enough money for the full autumn line of FuBu? (p.231)

### **Summary**

Various studies focusing on advertising and consumer culture have shown that advertising affects all audiences on conscious and sub-conscious levels. Because of this fact it is imperative that media literacy be incorporated into all curricula. The purpose of this review was to build a base for implementing important concepts into the curriculum in order to aid high school students in becoming media literate and critical thinkers. As

teachers we must model critical thinking and facilitate students' empowerment by exploring their own critical thinking with regards to how and why media affects them. Critical thinking, as defined by [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), is the mental process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information to reach an answer or conclusion. In the following chapter I discuss my methodology and analyze how it contributed to the exploration of my thesis statement.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces various mediums and how they were used by my focus group in order to address my research question. This focus group was completed in one after school session of about three and a half hours. A second session was not necessary. The method of procedure was responding to a questionnaire, and analyzing and responding to print and television advertisements within a focus group. Before choosing the print advertisements which I would use for my focus group activities I selected magazines which I knew were geared to a teenage audience. My criteria for selection consisted in choosing two magazines for a teenage male audience and two magazines for a female teenage audience. My goal in doing so was to explore the differences in male and female perspectives as related to my thesis statement. I felt that it would be interesting to see what the differences and similarities were in their perceptions. I anticipated finding differences and, in fact, my anticipations were validated.

I purchased four magazines FHM (For Him Magazine), Rolling Stone, YM (Young and Modern), and Cosmo Girl. It was a lot easier to purchase two magazines which were clearly aimed at a female audience than those for a male audience. YM and Cosmo Girl were my choices for the female audience and FHM is clearly for males, however, it can be argued that Rolling Stone is for both a male and female readership. In the end I did not choose any ads from Rolling Stone magazine simply because none appealed to my research as most ads were for products which could be used by either gender. I chose five ads from FHM and two from YM and three from Cosmo Girl creating a sample of five ads geared towards females and five ads geared towards males. I

chose my ads at random to not create any kind of bias. There were many ads to choose from and all presented various problems in terms of methods being used by advertisers to get the reader's attention and to ultimately get the reader to purchase the product.

The process of choosing my television advertisements was slightly different. I used the internet to locate websites which featured recent television advertisements. I narrowed it down to two brilliant sites which offered an array of television advertisements that foster critical thinking: [www.ad-awards.com](http://www.ad-awards.com) and [www.AdvertisementAve.com](http://www.AdvertisementAve.com). Upon viewing several of the commercials I chose a top five that were in my opinion the most interesting and thought provoking. I would have liked to choose five ads geared towards males and five towards females but this proved to be a difficult task as most ads were for products that could be used by both males and females. Before beginning the analysis, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire made up of twelve questions. (Please see Appendix A p. 77) I chose these questions because they allowed me to explore my thesis statement from various angles. The first set of questions deals with students' exposure to different forms of media. This factor was important to establish in order to determine to what degree students are being bombarded with advertising. The next set of questions deals more specifically with advertising and how it affects students' purchasing decisions and their views of themselves and others.

#### **Selection of Print Advertisements (please refer to Appendix B pp.79-89)**

I selected five print advertisements at random from FHM (For Him Magazine) which caters to a male readership between the ages of 18 and 25. I selected five other print advertisements at random from YM (Young and Modern) and Cosmo Girl which

both cater to a female readership between the ages of 13 and 19. The print advertisements selected from FHM are as follows:

1. An advertisement for Buffalo Jeans featuring a teenage male in a somewhat sexually suggestive pose where his right thumb is lowering his jeans on his right side leaving the beginning of his pubic area exposed. There are liquor bottles on a shelf in the background. He seems to be leaning against a bar, however, it does not appear to be a commercial establishment but rather a private one. There are also guns hanging on the wall in the background (Appendix B p.80) .
2. An advertisement for Altoids mints featuring a man in his late twenties early thirties dressed in clothing from the 70s and sporting a large afro. The caption reads “One Bad Motherpucker: The Curiously Strong Sours” (Appendix B p.81)
3. An advertisement for GBX shoes featuring a young African American who is covering a wall with colorful graffiti and the caption reads: “Make Your Mark” (Appendix B p.82) .
4. An advertisement for Timber Wolf Tobacco where one sees half of a racecar driver’s head covered by his helmet and the other half is a wolf’s visage creating a head that is half man half wolf. The caption compares the racecar driver and wolf as both having quick reflexes and great acceleration, as well as being leaders of the pack. Their only difference is that one has a lead foot and the other has padded paws. It is interesting to note that there is also a significantly large warning on the bottom left hand side cautioning under age users to not use their product as well as one cautioning their consumers that their product is not a safe alternative to cigarettes (Appendix B p.83) .

5. An advertisement for Guess Jeans that takes up two pages where on one page there is a close-up of Paris Hilton and a male model who are about to engage in a kiss and he has a hand placed on her breast. On the other page there is a medium shot of Paris Hilton wearing only a pair of jeans, blue stilettos and a lot of glittery diamond jewelry. She is covering her nude upper body with a stuffed animal. It is interesting to note that this advertisement was in a magazine catering to males and the advertisement does not feature any product for males. Guess does make jeans for males but there are none visible in the ad (Appendix B p.84) .

The print advertisements selected from YM are as follows:

1. An advertisement for ECKO clothing featuring female singer, RES. She is sitting on an amplifier. She is wearing a micro mini skirt, with a fitted sweater, high heels and leg warmers that sit a few inches below her knees. One leg is raised higher than the other as she is adjusting one of her legwarmers (Appendix B p.85).
2. An advertisement for Squeeze jeans where a teenage girl is sitting on her knees next to a teenage boy. The teenage boy is wearing only jeans and it seems as though he is trying to remove the jeans that the girl is wearing. She is wearing a zippered top which is suggestively unfastened to her bust line; her jeans are exposing part of her underwear and she has on some patent leather pink heels that match her top. There is a bookshelf in the background with books on its shelves (Appendix B p.86) .

The print advertisements selected from CosmoGirl are as follows:

1. An advertisement for Split Clothing where a young lady is lying on the floor with her head resting on a table. We can only see her upper torso and she is sporting a fitted top that falls below the shoulders. She appears to be smiling seductively (Appendix B p.87) .
2. An advertisement for B.U.M. Clothing featuring a teenage girl in tight, short, shorts and she is clinging to a teenage boy with one of her legs mounted on him in a sexually suggestive way. There is a tornado in the background and the caption reads: “B Heroic” (Appendix B p.88) .
3. An advertisement for Dollhouse Clothing featuring a teenage girl sitting on a tiled box. She is wearing a micro-mini jean skirt with colorful, striped socks that sit a few inches above the knees. She has layers of sweaters on and high leather boots. Judging by her facial expression she does not look very happy (Appendix B p.89) .

### **Selection of Television Commercials**

The five television advertisements I selected are as follows:

1. The first commercial is for Nike running shoes. It features a young man playing tag with society at large. There is a catchy tune without lyrics playing in the background and the ad invites the viewer to “play”. The ad can be viewed on [www.AdvertisementAve.com](http://www.AdvertisementAve.com).
2. The second commercial is for Frito Lay potato chips. The ad was aired at the 2003 Super Bowl. It features an elderly couple physically fighting over a bag of potato chips. The advertisement can be viewed on [www.AdvertisementAve.com](http://www.AdvertisementAve.com).



3. The third commercial is for Mountain Dew soda. The ad features teenage girls performing a variety of dangerous stunts. The song in the background keeps repeating the lyrics: "Thank heaven for little girls". At the end there is a group of teenage boys and one of them expresses the thought: "I think I'm in love". The ad can be viewed on [www.AdvertisementAve.com](http://www.AdvertisementAve.com).
4. The fourth commercial is for Toyota trucks. It features a female in her late teens and she yells into the camera directed at her teenage boyfriend: "This is for you, for spending all of your time with your friends and your truck." The scene cuts to the top of a cliff where the boyfriend's truck is being dropped over. The girlfriend is ecstatic about her actions until she sees the truck's resiliency as it bounces back onto its four wheels. The ad can be viewed on [www.ad-awards.com](http://www.ad-awards.com).
5. The fifth and final commercial is for Visa credit cards. It features the US women's volleyball team. They are practicing in anticipation for the 2004 summer Olympics. They are practicing in the middle of winter on a frozen beach wearing skimpy bikinis. The ad can be viewed on [www.AdvertisementAve.com](http://www.AdvertisementAve.com).

### **Questions Asked to Students**

Male students were asked to review the ads from FHM and female students were asked to review the ads from YM and Cosmogirl. They were asked to fill out the *Advertisement Analysis Log* (see Appendix C p.90), for each of the five ads that was geared to them. The *Advertisement Analysis Log* came from Leigh Stephens Aldrich's journalism book entitled *Covering the Community*. My first encounter with this book was during a graduate course where I had to prepare a presentation on any aspect of the media. Naturally, I chose advertising and part of my presentation was conducting an

interactive activity where other graduate students had to analyze print advertisements using the *Advertisement Analysis Log*. I decided to use this log in my research because it was so successful the first time and covers the areas I wanted to explore thoroughly and succinctly. Students from my focus group also filled out the questionnaire for each of the five television commercials which were viewed.

All students were then asked to compare and contrast advertisements in men's and women's magazines by viewing all of the ads. Each student filled out one *Advertisement Analysis for Contrast and Comparison of Advertisements in Men's and Women's Magazine* (see Appendix D p.91) . This analysis guide is also from Leigh Stephens Aldrich's journalism book entitled *Covering the Community*. It was also used as part of my graduate course work.

### **Interview Process and Experience**

Due to the fact that I am a teacher at the school where I chose my subjects, recruiting students to volunteer in my research was not too difficult. I did not get as many students as I would have liked, nonetheless, the number I ended up with was within the norm for a focus group. I had three males and three females participate in my study. All but one were students of mine so it was relatively easy handing out and collecting consent forms. Students were given the choice to choose a pseudo-name in order to remain anonymous. All chose to do so. Overall, the experience was interesting and educational. Students were motivated by the topic and spoke freely about their thoughts, feelings and opinions.

## **Limitations**

Although I asked for random volunteers from all of my classes, it was only the students in my enriched classes who volunteered to participate in my study. Let me clarify what enriched classes are. The high school I am presently teaching at offers two different level English classes. The first is regular which would be offered at any other high school and the second level is called enriched. In order for students to be in enriched English they must maintain an above 80% average in their English course. It is important to note that this alone does not grant a student a spot in an enriched class if there is great demand for the enriched class. For example, if there are four enriched classes of 32 students available but there are 130 students eligible, the ones with the highest grade point averages in English will be selected. In order to be admitted to the next level of enriched classes they must continue to maintain an above 80% average. Students do not get any extra credit for being in enriched English classes nor does it appear on their transcripts for Cegeps to see. However, they have the privilege of being exempt from English end of year exams in order to focus on other subject matters since it is presumed they are working on more advanced material and subject matter.

In addressing the possibility of bias considering my focus group consisted mainly of my own students I must explain that this is my first year teaching at the school and I had only known my students two weeks prior to the date of my focus group session. I did not know any of these students except for the fact that most were high achievers. With this respect I must say that the results of my findings disappointed me even more knowing that these were “cream of the crop” students and that they did not exhibit any

more feelings of sympathy than regular achieving students when discussing their foreign counterparts who are exploited in order for them to purchase the latest footwear.

Considering that my focus group consisted of only six students this in itself presents a limitation to my results as it would have been much more desirable for me to have a larger number of students in order to feel that my results could more accurately represent the adolescent population. For this reason, I cannot generalize about the influence media has on adolescents. Despite the small number of students, my focus group was exclusively made up of overachieving above average adolescents who made it a pleasure to work with and made my job of facilitating the focus group effortless. However, because my focus group was made up of only enriched students they did not always display a significant lack of critical judgment when answering various questions. Nonetheless, there is still a need to have media studies incorporated into the curriculum as these were above average students and are more likely to be more critical in their responses compared to the average student. If these students exhibited a lack of critical thinking at certain times then their average counterparts are at a serious disadvantage. In addition to my actual focus group I have drawn on my day to day experiences as a high school language arts teacher of the past six years in order to interpret my findings.

### **The Role of Education within this Consumer Culture**

The school in question has no media class as such; however, many of the teachers incorporate various forms of media within their curriculum. With regards to my topic, students complete a unit on advertising in Art class as well as Ethics and Culture and English. However, it is left up to the discretion of the teacher to address media effects and/or media use therefore not all students are exposed to these units, not to mention that

Ethics and Culture is a course that is in its second year of being offered to students in grade ten. It is important to state that critical thinking skills are not to be limited to a media specific class but must be present throughout the entire curriculum. The Quebec Education Reform as discussed in chapter IV addresses this issue. The following chapter addresses my findings and analysis based on the focus group activities elaborated on in this methodology chapter.

## CHAPTER III

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter I present the findings based on the various interview questions which students were asked to answer. My focus group was divided into four separate yet related activities. Firstly, students were asked to individually answer a questionnaire made up of twelve general, media-related questions (see Appendix A pp.77-78) . Secondly, students were separated by gender and male students were asked to analyze print advertisements geared towards a male target audience using the *Advertisement Analysis Log* (see Appendix C p.90) while female students were asked to do the same for print advertisements geared towards a female target audience. Thirdly, students were asked to view the print advertisements geared towards their opposite gender and to respond to the *Advertisement Analysis for Contrast and Comparison of Advertisements in Men's and Women's Magazine* (see Appendix D p.91) . Lastly, all students viewed the five pre-selected television commercials and were asked to analyze each one using the *Advertisement Analysis Log* (see Appendix C p.90). I will begin by presenting the findings based on my questionnaire made up of twelve general, media-related questions.

#### **Interview Questions**

The first question was chosen because it allowed me to explore specific feelings students have experienced in relation to their consumer experiences.

*Q. 1 Do you ever feel unhappy when you cannot buy something that is advertised? If so please give an example? What do you do to feel better?*

Two out of six students said they have never felt unhappy when they were unable to purchase an item which was advertised. Two of the students who said they have felt

unhappy gave clothing as examples and the rest gave examples of toys they remember wanting to have but could not get. In answer to what they did to feel better, most said that with time they got over it and eventually realized that it was not important. One interesting answer was from one of the females who said: “I just shrug it off and if I’m really upset, I think about it until I get tired of it.” What stands out here is that the majority of students have felt badly about not being able to purchase an advertised product at some point in their life. Moreover, students did not get instantly over it and went through some period of unhappiness and inadequacy which lasted at least a week. When comparing by gender, females appear to have felt unhappy more than males.

	Felt unhappy	Did not feel unhappy	In order to feel better
Male Students	1	2	Did something else
Female Students	2	1	Shrugged it off

Question number two was appealing to me because it allowed me to situate how much exposure to television my focus group had. By determining how much television my focus group viewed I could better understand to what extent they were exposed to television commercials. By asking for specific times and shows I could also deduct the types of commercials they were viewing. Advertisers will buy spots during specific shows that they know their target audience is watching.

*Q.2 How many hours per week do you watch TV? What 5 programs do you watch most regularly? (please indicate days and times they air if possible)*

Answers varied from three to forty hours of television viewing per week. All but one student mentioned *The Simpsons* as a show which they view regularly. The second

runner up was *Family Guy* with only one student not mentioning it. All other answers were varied and there was not much commonality among students. Because of this, students appear to be watching television at different times, on different days and on varied channels. I can only assume that students are viewing television whenever they have time to do so. Where students answered that they watched only three hours a week, they are certainly busy with other things and where students answered forty hours a week they have a lot of extra time on their hands. In comparing males and females within my focus group, males watch more television than females do.

	Hours/week of TV	Top 3 Programs viewed
Males	3-40 hours/week	1. The Simpsons 2. Family Guy 3. Big Brother
Females	4-13 hours/week	1. The Simpsons 2. Family Guy 3. Big Brother

I chose question number three because it allowed me to determine the extent to which students were exposed to print media. By determining the extent of this exposure I could deduct the extent to which students were exposed to print advertisements.

*Q.3 How much time do you spend reading magazines per week? Which magazines do you like to read? Do you purchase any of these magazines and if so where?*

Magazines are not popular with this group of students. Four out of six do not read magazines at all. One out of the latter answered that he prefers books. The remaining two answered that they read magazines anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour per week. They enjoy reading Teen People, People, In Touch, Cosmo Girl and Star. One student buys her magazines at pharmacies, grocery stores or corner store. Another has her mother



purchase them and the last of the three students did not mention where she purchases her magazines but she does mention in her answer that she buys her magazines. Females seem to be more exposed to print advertising than males are.

	Time spent reading magazines	Top 3 magazines	Place of Purchase?
Males	No specific amounts of times	1. Alternative Press (the only one mentioned)	Bought at corner store
Females	20 min-1/2 hour	1. Star 2. Teen People 3. People	Bought by their mother

The fourth question began to deal with my research question directly in the sense that it was a starting point in trying to understand what made a commercial stay in a teenager's mind.

*Q.4 Name the three first advertisements that stand out in your mind. Why do these stand out compared to all others?*

Not one answer as to which three commercials stand out was the same so I would like to mention all of them in no particular order. (Note: there should be eighteen ads if one multiplies the amount of students surveyed with the number of questions but one student mentioned four ads instead of three.) These are the products for which commercials were mentioned: Kit Kat chocolate bar, Nutri-Grain bars, Alexander Keith Beer, Nokia cell phones, Fantastik, Levis jeans, Crush Perfume, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Point Zero clothing, Fruitopia, McDonald's, Zellers, Oral-B, Nike, Tim Hortons, Doritos, Game Boy, Used Bookstores (I thought this was an interesting answer because I do not believe I have ever seen an ad for used bookstores...) Bathroom cleaner (This was the most interesting answer because the student was unable to remember the name of the

product, they simply described it as the one where the mom seems to be in jail at first. I am questioning how effective this commercial is if the viewer is unable to recall the name of the product but nonetheless remembers the ad because it is funny. )

When asked why the ads stood out compared to all others humor and entertainment were very important factors. All students mentioned either one of the two or sometimes both. Some mentioned a catchy tune; others mentioned the shapes and colors of the products. The frequency of a commercial being viewed was also mentioned as a factor as well as a particular product being their favorite brand. The results of this question point to males exhibiting more brand loyalty than their female counterparts. Moreover, males appear to mainly recall commercials for technological products whereas females recall commercials for food products.

	Ads that stood out	Reasons Why?
Males	Nike, Toffee, Doritos McDonald's, Gameboy Oral-B, Zellers, Used books	Brand loyalty, frequency of ad, catchy tune, entertaining, stupidity
Females	Alexander Keith, Nokia, Fantastik, Kit-Kat, Nutri-Grain, Point Zero, Fruitopia, bathroom cleaner	Colorful, humor, music, originality, stupidity

Question five was an important question because it would help me understand whether advertising plays a direct role in the students' purchasing habits and why it does or does not.

*Q.5 Would you say that advertising affects your purchasing habits? Why or why not?*

Three out of six students answered that advertising does not affect their purchasing habits. The other three decidedly felt that their purchasing habits were directly related to the advertisements they viewed. One female student said it best: “Things look so cool on commercials you just have to have them cause there cool”. When comparing male and female responses the responses were exactly the same pointing to the possibility that males and females are equally affected by advertising when making purchases.

	Advertising directly affects purchases	Advertising has no impact on purchases
Males	2 out of 3 said yes	1 out of 3 said no
Females	2 out of 3 said yes	1 out of 3 said no

I chose the sixth question because I recalled in my literature review that adolescents are the number one consumers with discretionary income and in 1997 American teenagers spent four million dollars on clothing, cosmetics and various other kinds of fashion items. I was curious to find out how my focus group compared to these findings.

*Q.6 How much do you spend on advertised products? Which brands do you buy most often? Why?*

None of the students gave me actual numbers. Answers varied from “very little” to “not very much”. I have reason to believe that my sample of students do not hold part-time jobs and do not yet know the true value of money. They receive money from their parents in order to spend it as they please and claim that they spend very little when in fact one would be surprised at how much money is really being spent. Only two students said they did not really care about brand names. Others were aware that they preferred

brand names over the no-name generic products claiming that they had tried the latter and there was a difference in quality. As one student pointed out “I only buy Kraft Dinner because it tastes better than the Super C brand”. Another point in defense of my earlier statement is how can these students purchase only brand names and yet claim that they spend very little money on advertised products? Another point which must be mentioned is that during our conversation various ethical issues were brought up related to brands, for example Nike and their usage of sweatshops. All students except for one answered freely and honestly that this was not a concern for them when it came to choosing a product. What comes first is if they like the product and want it. Like and desire are the only important factors. Whether other human beings were exploited in order for one to wear the latest running shoes is not important. Only one student seemed to have an issue with animal testing and made a conscious effort to not purchase products which are being tested on animals. For my focus group the welfare of animals was more important than that of other fellow human beings. In terms of comparing male and female responses both groups had similar answers.

In interpreting my sample group’s responses one may feel that they are not such avid consumers. In this case I must stress that they are not average teenagers. They are part of an elite group of students in an enriched language arts program. It is because of my everyday interactions with the average teenagers in the regular language arts program that I am able to assert that the average teenager who is less able to think critically spends more money on unnecessary purchases.

	\$ spent	Brands purchased	Why?
Males	Very little-not very much	Nike	Aesthetic quality
Females	Very little-not very much	Kraft Dinner, Billabong, Starter, Fire Kid, Coke	Better taste (Coke) Better quality

By choosing question number seven I tried to locate whether there is a line that cannot be crossed with teenagers and whether they had the capacity to find an ad offensive. I may sound sarcastic but anyone who has worked with teenagers knows that they thrive on shocking people and often have different standards in terms of what is and is not offensive.

*Q.7 Can you think of an advertisement that you found offensive in some way?*

*Why did you find it offensive?*

Three out of the six students could not think of any advertisement which they found offensive. The three others all mentioned commercials which used sex to sell their product. Two ads mentioned were for clothing and only one advertisement rightfully used sex in their commercial as it was an ad for condoms yet the student still found the ad offensive. All of these students felt that it was unnecessary to use sex to sell the product and one took it a step further by mentioning that it was “degrading to women”. In sort of a contradictory manner however, during open discussion all students seemed to agree that they were no longer fazed by sex omnipresent around them and being used to sell everything and anything. They also voiced the opinion that sex was not special anymore it is just “something you do” and is no longer an activity reserved for that special someone. Judging by their responses, female students are more sensitive to an advertisement’s offensive quality than male students are. It is important to note that these

answers came from students who have a certain ability to think critically. I have had classroom discussions with students who did not see anything offensive about ads which were clearly distasteful.

	Ads found offensive	Reason for offense
Males	1 out of 3 males said any ad using sex to sell product	1 out of 3 males said it degrades women
Females	2 out of 3 females said any ad using sex to sell product	2 out of 3 females felt there was no link to the product

I chose the eighth question because it dealt with impulse buying. I wanted to know if advertisers had the power to sell products to teenagers that were literally useless.

*Q.8 Have you ever made a purchase that you did not need? Why did you make the purchase if you did not need it?*

All of the students unanimously answered that they had in fact purchased an item they did not really need at least once in their life. This question is very interesting to me because of the collective answers. One student often buys expensive cologne which he never uses. Many others do not mention the products specifically but rather why they made the useless purchase and they even add how they felt even though it was not a part of the question. One student often buys things they do not need “usually cause everyone else had one or the commercial was cool”. Another bought something because “I wanted it, I wanted the feeling of owning it myself.” The answer I found most interesting was: “I am not sure why but I just wanted to have them. I was not pissed but just kinda mad I spent twenty dollars on this.” In comparing male and female answers both groups have equally made unnecessary purchases.

	# who have made unnecessary purchase	Reasons for unnecessary purchase
Male	3 out of 3 males said yes	Only 1 male specified "I wanted it"
Female	3 out of 3 females said yes	Only 1 female specified "I'm not sure why I just wanted them"

I chose the ninth question because it was related to the eighth question in terms of impulse buying but it went a step further in trying to understand how the purchase was made if it was not really affordable in the first place.

*Q.9 Have you ever purchased a good or service that you could not really afford? Why and how did you make that purchase if you could not really afford it?*

Three of the six students answered no to ever having purchased something they could not really afford. The others all said yes. Only three students mentioned what the products were (a shawl, a pair of jeans and cd's). Only two of the six students dealt with why they made the purchases and the answers were because they liked the items and felt they were cool. Only one student answered how the purchase was made if it was unaffordable and the answer was by borrowing the money from her friend. According to my focus group, males are more careful in their spending habits and make unaffordable purchases less often than females do.

	# of students who have made unaffordable purchase	Reason for purchase	How was purchase paid for?
Males	1 out of 3 said yes	"I wanted it"	No response
Females	3 out 3 females said yes	Only 1 female answered " I liked it"	Only 2 females answered "Used Christmas present money" "my friend lent me the money"

I chose my tenth question because it is more specific than question number seven which only deals with the idea of being offensive in a general way. Question number ten deals directly with the idea of sexism.

*Q.10 Can you think of a commercial that is offensive to men/women in some way? If so describe the commercial and why you believe it is offensive.*

One student did not answer the question; she is the same student who could not think of anything for question number seven either dealing with offensiveness in general. Another could not think of any as he answered the same for question seven as well. Two of the six students left mentioned beer commercials. One student explained that the commercial degrades women and the other discussed men and women rubbing against each other as a result of having drunk the beer. They felt it was “weird and would never happen”. One student mentioned an ice cream commercial where a girl steals a boy’s cone. They found this offensive because the boy apparently did not care about the girl’s actions because she had “talked” to him. “How unrealistic”. The last student could not mention a specific commercial but did say “I know a lot of commercials in general can be offensive if you take them seriously.” Judging by this boy’s other answers there are no contradictions and he really does not seem to be affected by advertising at all. He appears confident in himself, was not wearing any visible name brands during the focus group and I remember him mentioning that he never spends more than twenty dollars on his shoes. In comparing male versus female answers it is interesting to note that more females were able to recall offensive commercials in question number seven, yet when



asked to recall a sexist commercial the numbers even out and both males and females are able to recognize and recall sexist commercials.

	# of students who could recall sexist ad	Specific ads	Reason(s) ad(s) is/are sexist
Males	2 out of 3	1 male mentioned a beer commercial	Same male replied "it degrades women"
Females	2 out of 3	1.Rolo ice cream cone 2.Beer commercial	"stupid &repetitive" "men & women rubbing against each other.

I found the second to last question, number eleven interesting because it dealt directly with whether advertisements have an effect on teens' self-esteem.

*Q.11 Have you ever felt feelings of inferiority, less attractive or that you just did not measure up because of an advertisement or advertising in general? If so, which or which type of advertising was it? What was it about the advertisement that made you feel this way?*

Two out of the six students answered no and did not elaborate, they were male. The others all agreed that at one time or other they have felt feelings of inferiority. This means that all of the females agreed that they have felt and/or feel inferior as a direct result of viewing advertisements in general. None mentioned a specific ad but all mentioned the words "skinnier and prettier". All females felt inadequate in terms of beauty ideals being portrayed by advertising. Direct quotes from the females include: "I feel inferior because I can't be as pretty or have the same body as them"; "the ones with the supermodels dressing up and putting on make-up, or doing diet commercials, makes

me angry. They should get real women on there not toothpicks.”, “there are a lot of commercials that have these so-called perfect people who ask you if you want to be perfect like them, or be better than how you are now.” And lastly, one who summarizes the majority: “Of course all of the time...it is never one specific thing. It is just seeing people who are thinner or prettier than you everywhere: on TV, magazines, billboards, and the whole time you’re admiring, envying them and hating them all at once.” When comparing male versus female answers females are affected negatively by ads more than males are. This can perhaps be explained by females being more exposed to print advertisements than males are as seen in question number three. However, one can pose the question “why are less males affected negatively considering they are much more exposed to television than their female counterparts, as seen in question number two.

	# of students affected negatively by ads	Types of ads	Why students felt this way
Males	1 out of 3 males said yes	“Those featuring perfect people”	“they ask you if you want to be just like them or better than you are now”
Females	3 out of 3 females said yes	“Diet ads, cosmetics, all in general”	“they’re sending out the message that you can be beautiful too-with makeup” “seeing people that are thinner or prettier than you everywhere” “they should get real women on there not toothpicks”

The last question, number twelve, interested me because I included the research from Teenage Research Unlimited, a Northbrook, Illinois market research company that specializes in the teenage market has come up with a theory that all teens can fit into one

of four categories: Influencers, Edge Group Members, Conformers and Passives. The characteristics of each group introduced by Berger (2000) are on p. 17 & Appendix A p.77-78).

I wanted to see how my focus group compared to their findings.

*Q.12 What do you think about Teenage Research Unlimited's four categories. Can you place yourself in one of the four categories? If so, which one? If not, why? Is there a new category you could come up with?*

One student saw himself as fitting into the passive category. Two other students felt they were only a bit passive. One student replied they belonged to the conformer category and the remaining two students refused to place themselves in any of the categories. One of these two created the “try to label me now” category. In terms of comparing male and female answers there was a passive in each group as well as one who refused to label themselves.

	Influencers	Edge group	Conformers	Passives	New Category	Refused to label themselves
Males			1	1		1
Females				1	1	1

The following are the findings based on my second activity where female students were asked to analyze print advertisements geared towards a female target audience. They used the *Advertisement Analysis Log* (Please see Appendix C, p.90) in order to complete the activity.

## **Print Advertisement Analysis**

### *Female Target Audience*

I will begin with the advertisements geared to a female target audience and the female reactions within my focus group. It is important to note that for this activity students were allowed and even encouraged to discuss amongst themselves but chose to mostly answer the questions individually. The first advertisement was for Dollhouse Clothes. All three girls were able to recognize that the intention of the ad was for the viewer to purchase the clothing. All three girls noticed that the female model in the ad was not sporting a happy face. "I find it funny how she looks unhappy while wearing the clothes if their aim is to make us buy them." Nonetheless, all girls said they would in fact purchase some or all of the clothing showcased in this particular ad. When asked how they would make the ad better, all girls replied to "make her smile, be happy. She looks like she is angry".

The second advertisement is for Eckō clothes. This ad features a young woman sitting on an amplifier. This ad did not seem to be appreciated by any of the girls. They all recognized once again that the intention of the ad was to sell the product but only one out of the three girls said she would purchase the clothing visible in the ad except for the skirt because it was too short. This same girl felt that there were not any stereotypical images in the ad except for the fact that the model is wearing a very short skirt and she felt that girls are always portrayed as "short skirt loving". When asked how you would make this ad better two of the three girls that replied said:

"Instead of having her tug at her sock, I'd have her in a more comfortable position, just to show her at ease and comfortable"

“There should be a point, not just some random girl sitting on an amp who happens to be wearing nice clothes.”

The third advertisement was for Squeeze Jeans. It showed a teenage boy helping a teenage girl out of her jeans. All girls recognized the aim of the ad. When asked whether they found any stereotypical images in the ad all three girls replied yes.

“The way the guy looks like he is pulling down her pants just adds to the stereotype that some guys think girls who dress like her are “easy”.

“Yes, why is he undoing her pants? What, are they supposedly so nice he has to try them on too? It is leading somewhere...”

“That guys will try to get close if you’re wearing revealing or brand name clothing”.

It is interesting to note that none of the girls said they would purchase this product for reasons such as they did not like the ad, or jeans are jeans and these have nothing special and lastly there was nothing appealing about the ad or product. This was one of the sexier ads and it is fascinating that it did not seem to get the girls’ attention in any positive manner. None of the girls liked the ad nor would they buy the product. Does this mean that sex does not always sell? When asked how they would make the ad better, the girls responded:

“Notice again, they aren’t happy. Give the guy a shirt, pull up her shirt and pants.”

“He would have a shirt, hers would be fully buttoned and the books in the background would be in focus.”

“Try and make the guys’ advances less obvious.”

The fourth ad was for BUM Equipment Clothing. It pictured a teenage girl embracing a teenage boy and there seemed to be a tornado in the background. For this ad all three girls also felt that there were stereotypical images being portrayed:

“Well people always think the man would save the woman when women are just as capable of saving as the men”

“Yes, by him hugging the girl in this situation shows that the girl can’t be independent. And the fact that the motto is “belong” just preys on our crave to be accepted.”

“Yes, why does the girl have to have her leg wrapped around him like that? It looks weird and doesn’t work with the whole fear of tornado thing.”

To conclude, when asked how they could make the ad better, all of the girls felt that the boy should not be holding the girl, that perhaps the girl should be in the position of savior and that maybe they should be in a bomb shelter as opposed to outside in proximity to the tornado. Nonetheless, two out of the three girls claimed they would indeed purchase the product, one because the shorts were red and that is her favorite color and the other because she likes loose comfortable clothing. (I suppose this is a matter of perspective because the clothes were relatively tight fitting.) What must be mentioned is this is the only ad that seemed to have elicited some kind of emotion from the girls. When asked whether the ad was able to evoke some emotion two of the three girls replied:

“Yes, I really disapprove of the motto and pose. How can you belong by buying a certain material object? And the fact at how she is clinging to him is just stupid.”

“I found this ad extremely funny. Why would anyone in their right mind be holding each other in a semi-sexual fashion, when they could be running away from the tornado instead? This is hilarious!”

The fifth and final ad was for Split Clothing. It features a close up of a young woman’s face and you can see a glimpse of her top. All three girls were aware of the ad’s intention. None of the girls found any stereotypical images. Two out of the three girls would purchase the product and one already knew of the brand. The girl who said she would not purchase the product was not really clear on what the product was which was being advertised. The ad did not evoke any emotion from any of the girls. When asked how to make the ad better one of the girls suggested to show more of the model and not just her face. Another girl suggested focusing more on the clothing. The third girl who was not really clear on what product was being advertised thought “there should be more of a point to the ad.”

What was clear is that all of the girls knew exactly what the ads were trying to accomplish and that it was to ultimately sell their products. What also stood out is the fact that the girls were able to recognize and identify stereotypical images. What was not very clear was whether the ads effected their final decision to purchase the product in question.

Ad	# of girls aware of ad's intention	Stereotypical images present in ad	Ad used sex to sell product	# of girls who would purchase product	Did ad elicit emotion?
Dollhouse Clothes	all	none	yes	all	no
Eckō Clothes	all	none	yes	1 out of 3	no
Squeeze Jeans	all	yes	yes	none	no
BUM Equipment Clothing	all	yes	yes	2 out of 3	yes
Split Clothing	all	none	yes	2 out of 3	no

The following are the findings based on the second activity where male students were asked to analyze print advertisements geared towards a male target audience. As above they used the *Advertisement Analysis Log* in order to complete the activity.

### **Print Advertisement**

#### *Male Target Audience*

The first advertisement was for Winter Green Tobacco. It showcased a face which was half race car driver half wolf. All three boys were able to recognize the ad's intention. All boys agreed that there were no stereotypical images. None of the boys would buy the product because none of them smoked nor used tobacco. All three boys felt that the ad could be better by simply placing more emphasis on the product and by giving more information about it. One boy stated: "The ad would be better if it made sense. Tobacco won't make you lead the pack nor will it give you quick reflexes as the ad is insinuating."

The second ad was for Buffalo clothes. It pictured a young man leaning on a bar with one hand lowering his jean waistline in a seductive manner. In terms of stereotypical



images two out of the three boys felt that the ad was portraying someone who is supposedly “cool” wearing Buffalo Jeans. Two out of the three would purchase the product if they liked it and if it was within their price budget. The one student who would not purchase the product claimed that he preferred shorts over pants. When asked how the ad could be better, one student felt there should be more emphasis on the clothes. The second student said he would advertise something different and the last boy said he would leave the ad as is.

The third ad was for Altoid Mints. It featured a man wearing clothing from the 70s and the caption at the bottom of the ad read “One Bad Motherpucker”. Two boys would purchase the product and in fact one had already tried the product and is of the opinion they are good mints. It is interesting to read the third boy’s response:

“Yes, they would probably catch my attention with the ad but I wouldn’t buy it unless I knew it was good.”

My question to him if I had a chance to do it again, would have to be: how would you know if they were any good unless you tried them?

The fourth ad was for GBX shoes. The ad features a young black teenager covering a wall with colorful graffiti. The twist in the ad is that the spray painted fictional character is the one sporting the shoes. When asked whether there were any stereotypical images two out of the three boys mentioned the idea that the ad was portraying a bad boy image. One of the boys included the idea of a black teenager as the graffiti artist being stereotypical and he also referred to what the fictional character was smoking as a joint. It is unclear as to whether it is a cigarette or a joint but I myself did not notice this detail the first time around. It was only after this boy pointed it out that I also felt the cigarette

could in fact be seen as a joint. When asked whether they would purchase the product all three boys replied no. The reasons given were: probably too expensive, not my style and I already have good shoes. In answer to how the ad could be better two of the three boys replied “place more emphasis on the shoes”. The third boy replied: “I can’t say the graffiti is wrong because it is an art. I would take the guy with the joint out.”

The fifth and final ad was for Guess Jeans. This was the sexiest ad on the male target audience side and interestingly enough did not showcase any male in any jeans. The only visible jeans were worn by the female model in the ad. All boys would not buy the product. When asked how to make the ad better one replied: “by advertising the jeans better” and another had no opinion. In terms of stereotypical images one boy replied: “For starters, she has no shirt on, and on the back of the ad the couple is caressing and kissing one another.” This same boy was the only one who felt that the ad evoked some emotion from him stating: “I honestly feel that this ad is what any other ad would do. Catch attention by showing you something perfect, sexy, etc...”

Just like the girls, all of the boys always knew the exact intent of each ad. Most of the time, they seemed to agree on the stereotypical images within the ads and did not seem to be easily persuaded to purchase the products being advertised. All boys also seemed to be in agreement about the fact that placing more emphasis on the actual product would create a better advertisement.

Ad	# of boys aware of ad's intention	Stereotypical images present in ad	Ad used sex to sell product	# of boys who would purchase product	Did ad elicit emotion
Winter Green Tobacco	all	none	no	none	no
Buffalo Clothes	all	yes	yes	2 out of 3	no
Altoid Mints	all	none	no	2 out of 3	no
GBX Shoes	all	yes	no	none	no
Guess Jeans	all	yes	yes	none	yes

The following findings are based on my third focus group activity.

**Contrasting and Comparing Print Advertisements from Women's Magazines and Those from Men's Magazines (Please see Appendix D, p. 91) .**

Following the print advertisement activity where female students were asked to view ads which were targeted at female readers and male students those targeted at male readers, all students were asked to view the ads which were targeted at readers of the opposite sex and to then compare them to the ads they had previously analyzed. It is interesting to note that all students felt that the ads were not very different from one another in terms of the way women and men are portrayed as well as the specific gender roles they play. Women were always seen as helpless sex objects and men were always viewed as strong, self-confident individuals. One student felt that in all of the advertisements the women were all sexy and the men were just there "going along with whatever the product was so they are guaranteed a hot girlfriend if they have the product." Another student viewed women as " a prize, a goal something that all males want but only the select few who have the product can get" this same student saw males

as “the guy everyone wants to be because they have everything a man needs in his simple life.” Another student referred to women in the ads as appearing as though their “sole purpose is to attract men.” and saw men as “controllers”. When asked how these advertisements could all be improved all students mentioned placing more emphasis on the actual clothing. One student mentioned using more humor. Three of the responses I received are so powerful that I must include all three. The first two are from female students and the last one is from a male student.

“The clothes, advertisements can have clothes that cover, they can make sense, they could cut down on the sex and smoking.”

“Make people realize that women are not sex objects and men either. Just show clothes no other hinted things.”

The final quote which is the most powerful of all is from the same boy who mentioned that ads should use more humor. He shows reasoning well beyond his age of fifteen years:

“Humor, humor will get anyone’s attention. But all of these advertisements are showing people what they want/need/strive for. So unless the interests of general people change, the advertisements won’t change.”

	Ads for men	Ads for women	Ways of improving ads
Males	-Men portrayed in specific gender roles -Men seen as strong, self-confident individuals	-Women portrayed in specific gender roles -Women seen as helpless sex objects	Use more humor
Females	-Men portrayed in specific gender roles -Men seen as strong, self-confident individuals	-Women portrayed in specific gender roles -Women seen as helpless sex objects	-Place more emphasis on product -Cut down on sex and smoking

Lastly, these are the findings based on my final focus group activity which consisted of a television commercial analysis.

### **Television Commercial Analysis**

For this segment of the focus group students were asked to view five different television commercials for various products. Following the viewing of the commercials students were given some time to fill out a copy of the *Advertisement Analysis Log* (Please see Appendix C, p.90).

The first commercial viewed was for Nike running shoes. The ad featured a young man in the middle of a city wide game of Tag. For this commercial all students were aware of the ad's intention which is to sell Nike shoes and products. Four out of the six students said they would purchase the product being advertised. One student mentioned that they really like Nike products. When asked how they felt about the company's ethical standards of using child laborers he simply replied that was not a concern of his and that if he likes a product he buys it, it is as simple as that. Another student did not view this company favorably precisely because of the fact that they use child laborers. Others were a little more reasonable mentioning they would buy the product only if it were affordable and comfortable. The television commercials seemed to be more successful in triggering emotions compared to the print advertisements. Two students replied that the commercial made them want to run around and play tag and that the music was good, it made them happy.

The second commercial was for Frito Lay chips and showcased an elderly couple physically fighting for a bag of chips. This commercial elicited the most responses to the question of whether the ad was teaching any values. One student felt that the ad was

teaching the value of beating your wife. Another felt it was teaching the viewer to do whatever they could to get Frito Lays chips. Other students felt it taught the value of “don’t abuse people, it doesn’t pay off”. One student was more positive and felt that the commercial was promoting the value of loving your family more than the chips. Five out of the six students said they would buy the product but they all felt the need to specify that it was not because of the ad but because they either liked chips or this particular brand. When asked how they could make this ad better, two of the students which just so happened to be female said they would like the elderly woman to get the chips and that she should have at least gotten a chance to “smack” the elderly man to make it fair. When asked whether the ad evoked any emotion only one student responded: “It was funny and violent. It was funny. Old people make me laugh, and old people pushing each other around are very funny.”

The third ad was for Mountain Dew soda. It featured a group of teenage girls performing extreme stunts. The background song’s chorus was: “Thank heaven for little girls”. Five out of the six students said they would purchase the product but once again two of the students felt the need to specify that it had nothing to do with the ad but the fact that they liked the taste of the product. The values which were mentioned as being promoted by the ad were “girls can do anything as well as boys” and “you can achieve more by drinking Mountain Dew”. What was most interesting about the reactions to this advertisement is that most students felt that it was too exciting, too fast paced and saturated with action. Some interesting comments were:

“I would slow the images, so you would know what was happening.”

“Make it calmer and more relaxed.”

“It was boring; I would’ve made it less exciting.”

Only one student responded to the emotion evoking question and her response was: “What does this have to do with Mountain Dew?”

The fourth commercial was for Toyota trucks. It featured an angry girlfriend who is upset that her boyfriend spends too much time with his male friends and to spite him she has the truck driven off a cliff, only the truck lands upright because of its resilience. Only three of the six students felt that any values were being instilled by the advertisement. The first felt that the ad was teaching viewers not to be fooled easily. The second felt the ad was perhaps teaching viewers “not to get angry at someone for little reason cause your revenge might not work out.” The third student felt that the ad was teaching viewers that “pissed off girlfriends will try to ruin your car.” Four out of the six students felt that this commercial contained stereotypical images. The stereotypes ranged from girls are vengeful to the “crazy obsessive girlfriend” image to teenagers are destructive. Most students had their opinions on how the ad could be improved such as add music, show the guy’s expression as his truck hits the ground, more emphasis on reality, add a price and maybe less destruction. Two students did not feel the ad needed improvement and one out of two provided an elaborate explanation: “I wouldn’t make the ad better. It’s a good way to catch attention because there are so many car commercials. Humor is a great way to get attention.”

The last commercial was for Visa credit cards. I included this ad because it portrayed the stereotypical images of female Olympic athletes in skimpy bikinis playing volleyball. I debated including the ad because the legal age to have your own credit card is eighteen nonetheless some parents include the name(s) of their children as secondary

users of their credit cards. According to my focus group none of my sample of students was in this situation but their answers were nonetheless very interesting. Only one of the six students felt that this commercial had any stereotypical images and she questioned: “Um...why couldn’t it be guys playing volleyball?” Five out of the six students felt that the ad could be improved by placing more emphasis on the actual product. When asked whether they would purchase this product half of my focus group responded they would not due to the fact that they are underage. The other half answered that they would in fact acquire this credit card stating reasons such as: I will probably need a credit card one day, Visa seems to be a good card and the most alarming of all: “Yes, I would get a Visa card. Credit cards = freedom to buy anything. Until the bill comes.” I feel that this statement is alarming coming from a fifteen year old girl because she is perpetuating the idea of instant gratification, feel good now and worry about the consequences later. It is a frame of thought that has placed too many in financial positions that are less than envious.

Commercials	#of students aware of ad’s intention	Stereotypical images present in ad	Ad used sex to sell product	# of students who would purchase product	Did ad elicit emotion?
Nike Shoes	all	none	no	4 out of 6	Yes, happiness
Frito Lay Chips	all	yes	no	5 out of 6	Yes, happiness
Mountain Dew soda	all	none	no	5 out of 6	Yes, over stimulation
Toyota Trucks	all	yes	no	None due to monetary factor	Yes, laughter
Visa credit card	all	yes	yes	3 out of 6 said no due to being underage	No



## **Contrasting and Comparing Television Commercials for a Female Target Audience and Those for a Male Target Audience**

I was unable to have my sample of students contrast and compare the television commercials in the same way that I had them compare and contrast the print advertisements. The print advertisements that I chose came from specific magazines with specific target audiences and most of the time the product could only be used by a specific gender. In the case of the television commercials I chose, they were for products which could be purchased by either gender. Therefore attempting to compare and contrast how males and females were being used to lure them into buying the product being advertised would not be as precise. Nonetheless, males and females were often used in a sexual manner, that is, the U.S. female volleyball team in bikinis used to sell Visa.

### **Summary**

It was evident that all students are knowledgeable when it comes to stating any single advertisement's intention and that it is to sell a product. What remains unclear is why certain students are more influenced than others when it comes to certain advertisements and whether female students are really more influenced by advertising than their male counterparts. Many were adamant that they would purchase products but felt a need to specify that it had nothing to do with the advertisement. I feel there are subconscious factors at work here that students themselves may not be fully aware of. There are many factors at work here and all of these various factors affect students differently. Despite the small number of students that make up my focus group my findings are still significant. My findings are important because they show that above average students are not as media savvy as we think they are, at least not in their ability

to resist advertising's dominant meanings and to in turn produce their own meanings. These students are still being duped into consuming. If these above average students are being misled what is occurring to the average student? I am able to assert these statements because of my day to day interactions of the past six years with various adolescents. In a recent classroom discussion one grade eleven student admitted to not knowing of the concept of product placement defined by [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) as "the appearance of a product or service in a broadcast program or movie, paid for by the manufacturer to gain exposure for the product or service". When an adolescent does not realize that their favorite celebrity was paid to reach for that specific soft drink within their favorite sitcom this is a call to action. Adolescents need to become more aware of the insidious methods advertisers are using to target them. My findings support my assertion that education must play a greater role in addressing the issue of adolescent consumerism. In the next chapter I discuss the role of education within consumer culture.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ROLE OF EDUCATION WITHIN CONSUMER CULTURE

#### Why Should the Curriculum Address this Topic?

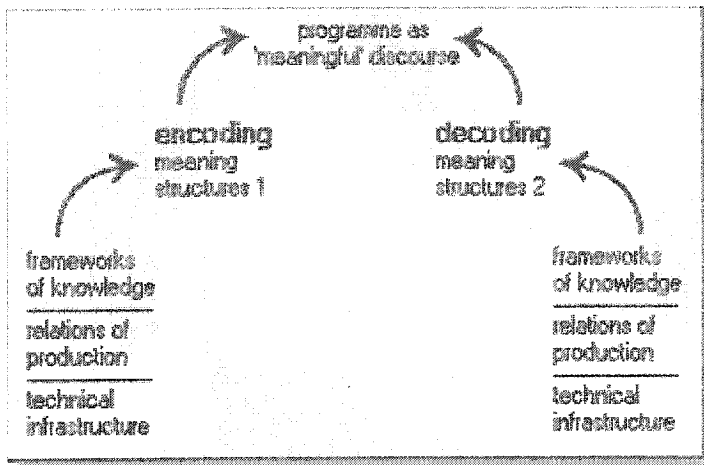
It is no secret that students are increasingly exposed to media. The type of reading they are doing is changing. They are reading fewer novels and more internet websites. They watch more and more television and are progressively more exposed to various types of media. This exposure needs to be discussed between parents and their children but the discussion needs to continue within the classroom setting. Not only does this discussion need to continue within the classroom but the classroom needs to adapt to the changing times by incorporating these various types of media within the curriculum in order to be able to have this much needed discussion.

According to Freire and Giroux (1989) "The language of educational theory should embody a public philosophy dedicated to returning schools to their primary tasks: to be places of critical education in the service of creating a public sphere of citizens who are able to exercise power over their own lives, and especially over the conditions of knowledge production and acquisition" (p.viii) . Freire and Giroux note that educators who refuse to recognize popular culture as a major part of students' knowledge are devaluing students by refusing to work with the understanding students already have. By doing so, teachers eliminate the possibility of creating a link between school and the students' everyday lives. By no means should teachers replace all traditional material with modern day media, a balance between the two is what should be strived for. Another critique that is offered by Freire and Giroux is the idea that most teachers use popular culture texts as bait to lure students into the lesson of the day. Teachers should use the

bait as the focus and not just as the introduction in order to get a more thorough discussion and analysis in motion. Oftentimes, students see popular culture texts as just something they spend a lot of time viewing. In terms of analyzing, students learn from school that they can analyze novels and poems but television commercials and print advertising are just things they absorb. This is clearly indicated from the results of the focus group where students did not show much analytical thinking through their responses. Students need to understand that media affects them and that various types of media are also texts and carriers of meanings and messages which can be analyzed just like novels and poems. By coming to this realization students can be empowered to think more critically in terms of how and why media affects them.

### **How Does Media Affect Us?**

Stuart Hall (1980) created a model of encoding-decoding to explain how media affects us. According to his model the makers of advertisements, or any form of media for that matter, come to the table with their own references of knowledge. The process of creating this message is called *encoding*. The final product is the *text*. The process where the viewer is interpreting the text is referred to as *decoding*. In order to decode the text viewers, just like the producers of various texts, use their own references of knowledge.



Source: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem08c.html>

Relationship of text, its production, and its consumption with infrastructural elements in Stuart Hall's (1980) « Encoding-Decoding » model.

### *On a Personal Level*

Radio, TV, film and other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our:

- identities
- sense of self
- notion of what it means to be male or female
- sense of class
- sense of ethnicity
- sense of race
- nationality
- sexuality
- ideas of "us" and "them"

Some advertisements help us forge these ideas in obvious and overt manners stating what it is they want us to think and feel however; a lot do so in a discreet fashion. As mentioned by Strinati (1995), many advertisements use a postmodern approach to

their advertising techniques. Ads formerly used to clearly describe the product or service they were advertising, clearly mentioned why one should purchase the product. Nowadays, one can view a commercial, remember the commercial, but not really remember or be clear about what product was in fact being advertised. As noted in my focus study this was evident when one of the students was able to remember a commercial because of its use of humor but he was unable to recall what product was actually being advertised.

#### *On a Global Level*

The media helps us shape our views of the world. One must first take into consideration the inequalities in the distribution of the media. Depending on which part of the world you are in, you will have different access to different types of media. Nonetheless, one must have a critical mind to interpret and analyze all of the different media that we are bombarded with on a daily basis. As my findings showed, students need to develop their critical and analytical thinking. Depending on who is in control of what media we may not necessarily be getting the real truth. One sees this everyday just by reading the coverage of the same current event reported by two different newspapers with different ownership. With relation to advertising, Western popular culture influences various countries worldwide and afflicts teens from abroad who strive to be like their American counterparts.

#### *On a Moral Level*

The media affects our deepest values and what we consider to be good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil, albeit, not everyone is easily convinced or influenced. As shown in my focus group, even though one of my sample students knew Nike uses

children as laborers in their sweatshops laden with poor working conditions, he did not care and still buys Nike products because he likes the way they look. To this I can only answer that more needs to be done in terms of our educational curriculum in educating students to make more enlightened choices. However, freedom of choice must prevail. It must be noted that this is only one student out of six and if my focus group had been larger most likely there would have been more students who felt the same way however, in this particular case is not one student one too many?

### **Why Does Media Affect Us?**

We are saturated from cradle to grave in a media consumer society and therefore it is important to learn how to understand, interpret and criticize its meanings and messages. A theory by Sut Jhally (1995) speculates that preceding industrial society, other institutions such as family, community, ethnicity and religion were the dominant mediators and creators of cultural forms. Consumerism came to fill the void left by the disappearance of these institutions. The emerging institution of marketplace occupied the cultural terrain left void by the evacuation of these older forms. The media is a powerful source of pedagogy that is often underestimated. It contributes to educating us about:

- How to behave
- What to think, feel, fear, believe, desire –and what not to
- How to dress
- How to look
- How to consume
- How to react to members of different social groups
- How to be popular, successful and avoid failure

- How to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices and institutions

Conforming = Good

Being different = Bad

Those who uncritically follow the dictates of media culture tend to “mainstream” themselves following the dominant fashions, values and behavior. On the other hand, as stated by Naomi Klein in *No Logo* those who identify with subcultures such as punk culture, look and act differently from those in the mainstream and thus create identities defining themselves against standard models. One could say that they are not being different, they are just choosing another group to dictate to them how to look, think, act, and feel.

### **Cultural Studies**

The study of culture is valuable because it provides some tools that enable one to read and interpret one’s culture critically. In interpreting one’s culture critically it is interesting to refer to Italian Marxist Theorist, Antonio Gramsci’s 1971 model of **hegemony** and **counterhegemony** (cited in Kellner 1995, p.7) . Hegemony is defined as the leadership or domination especially of one nation over others. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is the process by which those in power secure the consent of the socially subordinated to the system that oppresses them. Rather than by overt force (military/police) but instead through their control of religious, educational and media institutions, the elite attempt to persuade the population that the hierarchical social and economic system is fixed and natural, therefore unchangeable. Culture studies also promotes a multicultural politic and media pedagogy that aims to make people aware of how relations of power and domination are present in cultural texts such as those of



television commercials and print advertising. In addition, culture studies specifies how people can resist the dominant **encoded meanings** and produce their own critical and alternative readings. Lastly, culture studies show how media culture manipulates and indoctrinates us and therefore can **empower** individuals to resist the dominant meanings in media cultural products and to produce their own meanings.

As my study has shown, one of my sample adolescents was not wearing any visible brand name and admitted that he never spends more than twenty dollars when purchasing a pair of shoes. This indicates that it is possible to resist the dominant meanings in media culture and to produce one's own meanings. Cultural studies would enhance students' learning and there would be more students such as my latter example who would be able to resist the dominant meanings in media culture.

### **Quebec Education Reform**

Quebec has not had an educational reform since the sixties. Nonetheless, there have always been directives on specific guidelines advertisers have been obligated to follow. With a rise in high school dropouts and a sense that the present curriculum is not meeting everyone's needs a new and improved education program is in the process of being implemented. It can already be found in the primary schools and will reach the secondary schools by September 2005. The Quebec Education Program (2003) recognizes that there are many different media omnipresent in our daily lives and that they represent an important dimension in our cultural universe.

Although schools and the different media are rivals in many respects, the school has a major role in the following areas: familiarizing students with the functions of the various media, enabling them to master the different modes of

communication employed in the various media, helping them develop the critical judgment necessary to take full advantage of the possibilities offered by different media and enabling them to recognize their potential effects (p.27) .

The focuses of development of the Quebec Reform are on the four following points:

1. Awareness of the place and influence of the different media in his/her daily life and society.
2. Understanding of media representations of reality
3. Use of media-related materials and communication codes
4. Knowledge of and respect for individual and collective rights and responsibilities regarding the different media

Each of the four focuses is in synch with my research highlighting the various areas that need to be covered by the curriculum if education is to accept and fulfill its role within consumer culture. Each of the four focuses can be directly applied to the ways in which I argue within my research that education must play a role in creating media awareness and understanding among students. Relating the four focuses back to advertising, the first one explores students' awareness of the places and influence of the different forms of advertising in his/her daily life and society. The second point explores students' understanding of media representations of reality within advertising. As my study pointed out, many students referred to these "so-called perfect people" present in advertising. Is this reality? The third point encourages students' use of media-related materials and communication codes. By studying advertisers' tools and techniques students have a better ability to recognize when they are being taken advantage of and are therefore less likely to fall victim to advertising. The last point explores students' knowledge and respect for their rights as consumers and those of advertisers. Each point is stated in a general objective to allow educators the freedom and creativity to cover a

variety of mediums and media-related matters. The lesson plan ideas included in my conclusion encompass all of the Quebec education reform focuses.

### **Summary**

It is important to include media literacy in our curricula. Adolescents need to be aware of the tools being used to sway their thinking. They need to be educated to think critically in order to make the right decisions. These are important skills which they will take with them to live a fulfilling and knowledgeable adult life.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In researching and writing about how advertising affects teenagers my goal was to find out for myself to what extent advertising affects our teens. Because of the fact that my focus group consisted of above average students I did not always get the findings that support the argument that adolescents are not critical thinkers. Withstanding this outcome I have a significant amount of in and out of classroom experience with average teens to be able to state that most adolescents need to refine their critical thinking skills. As presented in my lesson plan ideas which follow a recent assignment that both my regular and enriched students had to complete was “culture jamming”. This is where they choose a print advertisement, analyze it using the questions I provided them with and lastly distort the ad’s message creating a new one. All of the students in my enriched class understood the assignment and successfully distorted the ads initial meaning. At least half of the students in my regular classes had difficulties understanding the assignment, determining the ad’s initial message and successfully distorting it. In order for this assignment to be successful one needs to have basic critical thinking skills.

In terms of research difficulties or disadvantages I would have liked to have a larger sample of students to survey to feel as though I was getting a more accurate reading. I also would have preferred to get a random sample of teens as opposed to only those above average. But since we do not always get what we want but oftentimes what we need I suppose I had just enough participants to conduct my study.

In terms of my actual research and my findings, I was not too surprised most of the time. However, I don’t feel that my focus group was consistently critical and

analytical in their responses throughout the activities. Nonetheless, my findings still point to the fact that changes must be made to the curriculum which will in turn affect the way we live our lives. We must not let advertisers persuade us into consuming absurd amounts of products that create waste and as a result pollute our minds and our planet.

More research needs to be conducted in this area and laws need to be reviewed to prevent advertisers from using unethical means to achieve their goals. Since we will never be in complete control, and advertisers will always find a way around laws anyway, a good place to start is nonetheless in the classroom. By discussing these realities, encouraging critical thinking and facilitating student learning we can empower today's teens to have a better grip on their lives as consumers.

### **Lesson Plan Ideas: Suggestions for Teachers**

#### *Analyzing Advertisements*

Teachers can begin a unit on advertising by having the students analyze various advertisements providing from different mediums, for example, television and print. The advertisement analysis logs present in Appendix A, C and D pp.77-91 can be used for this activity.

#### *Creating Advertisements*

Following the analysis activity students can be asked to create their own advertisements. Students should be asked to create a new product. After the teacher has screened the products, students are asked to create their own television commercial as well as print advertisement in order to sell their product.

### *Culture Jamming*

Once students are aware of how advertisements are created and the meanings they can project students can be introduced to the idea of culture jamming. Culture jamming is a process where one takes an already existing ad and distorts the message that the original sender intended. Examples of ad spoofs can be viewed on [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org). I have included some in this thesis in Appendix E, p. 92 .

### *Consumer Rights and those of Advertisers*

Students can research the various laws that advertisers must abide by and those that are made to protect consumers.

### *Suggestions for Further Research*

There are many ideas, topics and themes which can be suggested for further research, here are a few of them.

1. My research focused on teenagers; in contrast, it would be interesting to research how advertising affects young children and perhaps even young adults as opposed to teenagers, and to compare the similarities and differences between the resulting effects. In addition a similar study could be very rewarding where one would use a larger focus group and the focus group would be followed over a longer period of time.
2. A topic that came to me while I was writing about my findings is the idea that advertising seems to affect girls' body images and sense of self more than it does boys. However, there is an increase in pressure for boys to look a certain way and they are exhibiting some of the same effects that used to be seen mainly in girls,

for example, eating disorders. It could be very worthwhile to study why girls' seem to be more affected than boys are.

3. A tangent that I almost went off on while writing my chapter on the role of education within this consumer culture is the field of cultural studies. Further research can be pursued on how cultural studies can be incorporated into the curriculum in order to increase students' ability to think more critically.
4. Once the Quebec education reform is implemented in high schools, it would be valuable to track whether it is successful in making a difference in helping students to become more critical thinkers.
5. In order to determine whether media plays a large role in weakening girls' sense of self-esteem and their body images, it could be fascinating to compare a group of teenage girls from another continent which is less exposed to media to a group of North American girls who are much more exposed to media and to analyze whether there is a correlation between exposure to advertisements and low self-esteem, poor body image etc.

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<http://www.adbusters.org>

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## APPENDIX A

Pseudo name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

### Interview Questions

1. Do you ever feel unhappy when you cannot buy something that is advertised? If so please give an example? What do you do to feel better?
2. How many hours per week do you watch TV? What 5 programs do you watch most regularly?(please indicate days and times they air and station if possible)
3. How much time do you spend reading magazines per week? Which magazines do you like to read? Do you purchase any of these magazines and if so where?
4. Name the three first advertisements that stand out in your mind. Why do these stand out compared to all others?
5. Would you say that advertising affects your purchasing habits? Why or why not?
6. How much do you spend on advertised products? Which brands do you buy most often? Why?
7. Can you think of an advertisement that you found offensive in some way? Why did you find it offensive?
8. Have you ever made a purchase that you did not need? Why did you make the purchase if you did not need it?
9. Have you ever purchased a good or service that you could not really afford? Why and how did you make that purchase if you could not really afford it?
10. Can you think of a commercial that is offensive to men/women in some way? If so describe the commercial and why you believe it is offensive.
11. Have you ever felt feelings of inferiority, less attractive or that you just did not measure up because of an advertisement or advertising in general? If so, which or which type of advertising was it? What was it about the advertisement that made you feel this way?

12. Teenage Research Unlimited, a Northbrook, Illinois market research company that specializes in the teenage market has come up with a theory that all teens can fit into one of four categories: Influencers, Edge Group Members, Conformers and Passives. The characteristics of each group introduced by Berger (2000) are as follow:

1. Influencers: They are quick to embrace fashion trends, spend a good deal of money on fashion trends, and influence spending habits of other teenagers.
2. The Edge Group: Members of this group continually change their looks in an attempt to be anti-fashion and drop their fashion looks when influencers adopt them.
3. Conformers: Most teenagers fall into this category. Conformers use popular brands to strengthen their self-esteem.
4. Passives: Teenagers in this category are not particularly interested in using fashion as a statement or a means of fitting in. They buy clothes based on what is available rather than being concerned about being fashionable (p. 94) .

What do you think about Teenage Research Unlimited's four categories? Can you place yourself in one of the four categories? If so, which one? If not, why? Is there a new category you could come up with?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS**

buffalo david bitton © 2004 212-302-6767

photo: todd k. hyatt/epes

www.buffalofans.com

FHM (For Him Magazine) Sept. 2004

allrights.com



# ONE BAD MOTHERPUCKER

THE CURIOUSLY STRONG SOURS



**GBX**  
GBXSHOE.COM

MAKE YOUR MARK.



**QUICK REFLEXES.**

**QUICK REFLEXES.**

**GREAT ACCELERATION.**

**GREAT ACCELERATION.**

**LEADS THE PACK.**

**LEADS THE PACK.**

**PADDED PAWS.**

**LEAD FOOT.**

**UNDER AGE**  
OUR  
POLICY.  
OUR  
PRACTICE.  
**NO TOBACCO**

**WARNING:**

THIS PRODUCT  
IS NOT A SAFE  
ALTERNATIVE TO  
CIGARETTES

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NASCAR is a registered  
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**LEADER OF THE PACK.**



GUESS

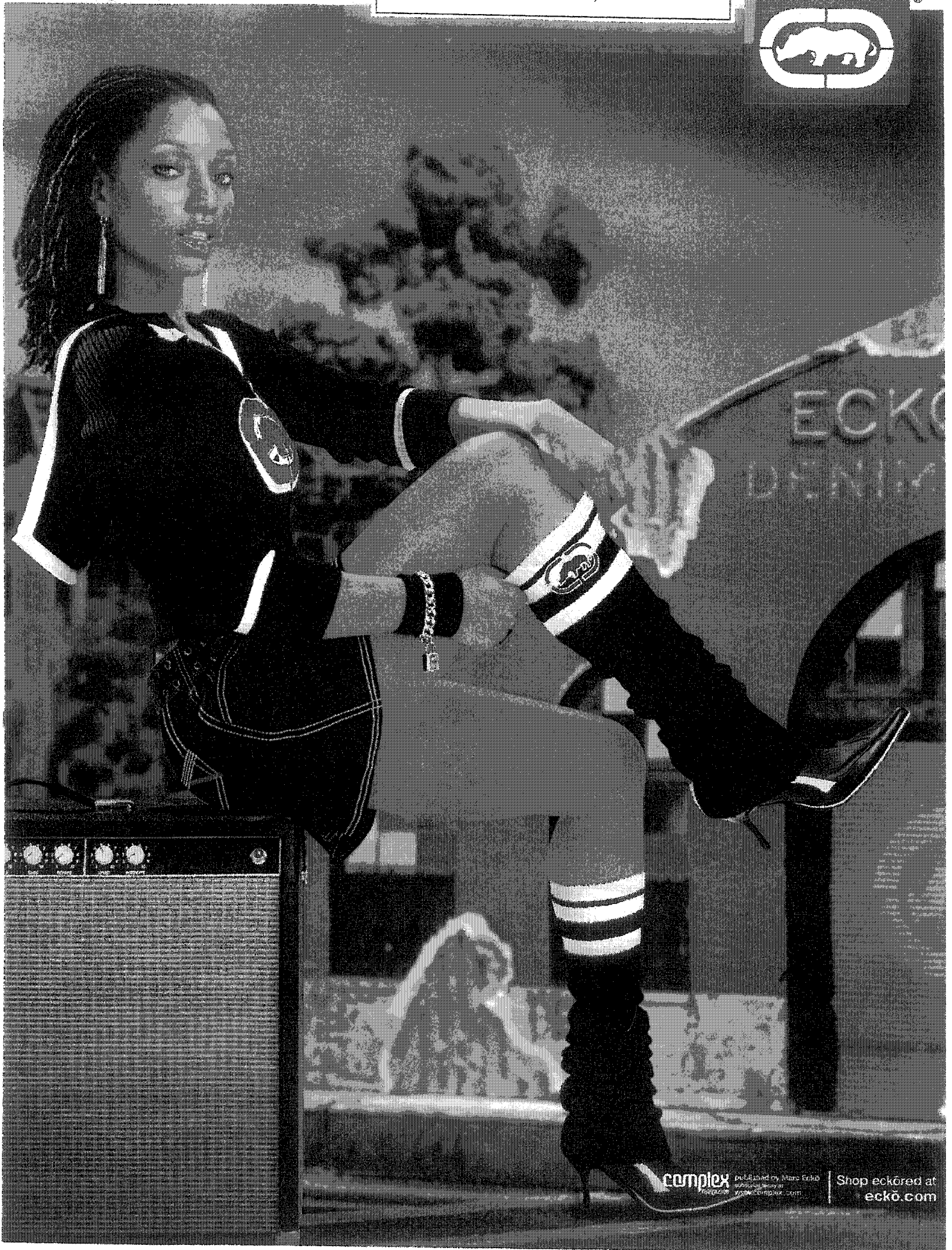
BY MARCIANO

GUESS.COM ART DIR: PAUL MARCHAND PH: EUGEN VON UNWERTH ©FHM 2004



Featuring: RES

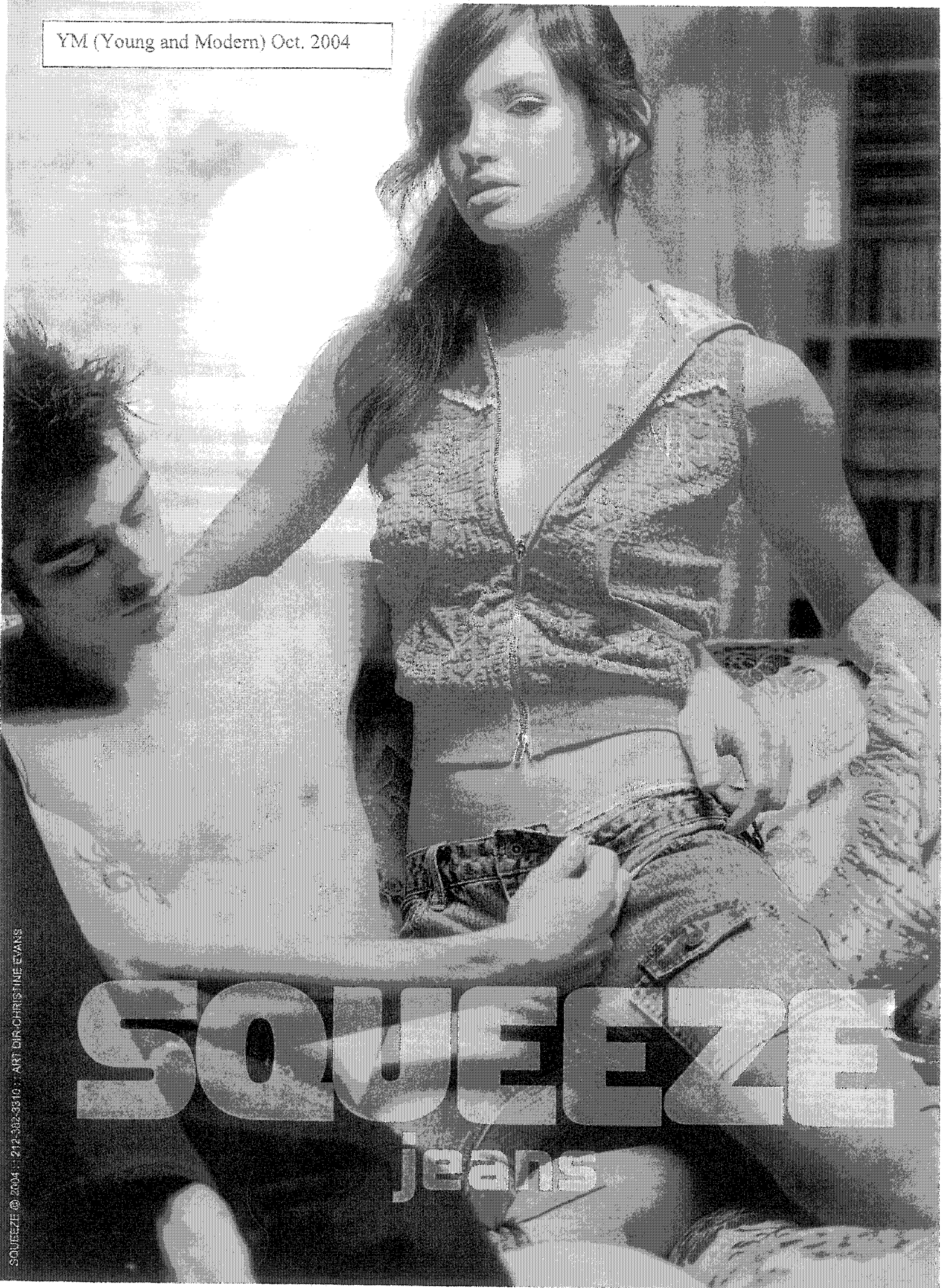
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# SQUEEZE

JEANS

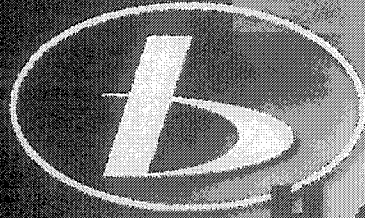
SQUEEZE © 2004 • 212-302-3310 • ART DIR: CHRISTINE EVANS

Cosmogirl September 2004

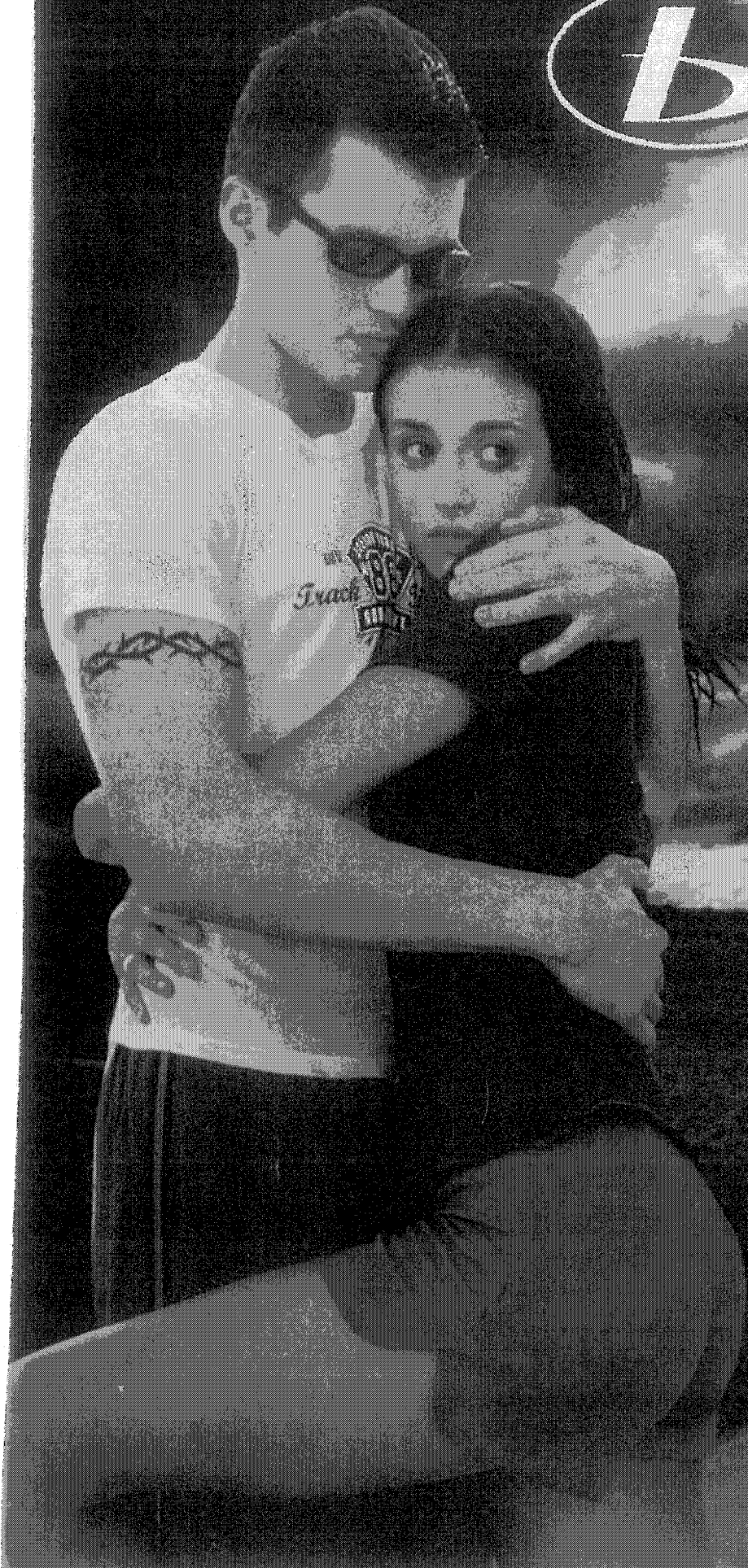
 split

[splitusa.com](http://splitusa.com) 949.206.8608

Cosmogirl September 2004



**Heroic.**



**B.U.M.**<sup>®</sup>  
EQUIPMENT

*Belong.*



**dollhouse**®

denim sportswear footwear outerwear kidswear jewelry intimates hats bags sleepwear



## APPENDIX C

### Advertisement Analysis Log

Taken from: Covering the Community by Leigh Stephens Aldrich, 1999.

#### Part A

- I- Where is the advertisement from?
- II- What is the product being advertised?
- III- Describe the setting.
- IV- Are there any technical tricks?
- V- What is the tone of the advertisement?

#### Part B

- 1. Who is portrayed in the advertisement?
- 2. What are the appeals of the advertisement?
- 3. Did you find any stereotypical images in the ad?
- 4. Who is the target audience for this ad?
- 5. How would you make this ad better?

## APPENDIX D

### Advertisement Analysis for Contrast and Comparison Of Advertisements in Men's and Women's Magazines

Taken from: Covering the Community by Leigh Stephens Aldrich, 1999.

1. Are the messages to women any different in the women's magazines than those in the advertisements in the men's magazines?
2. How are women shown?
3. What roles do they take/play in the advertisements?
4. Did you find any stereotypes?
5. How could these advertisements be improved?

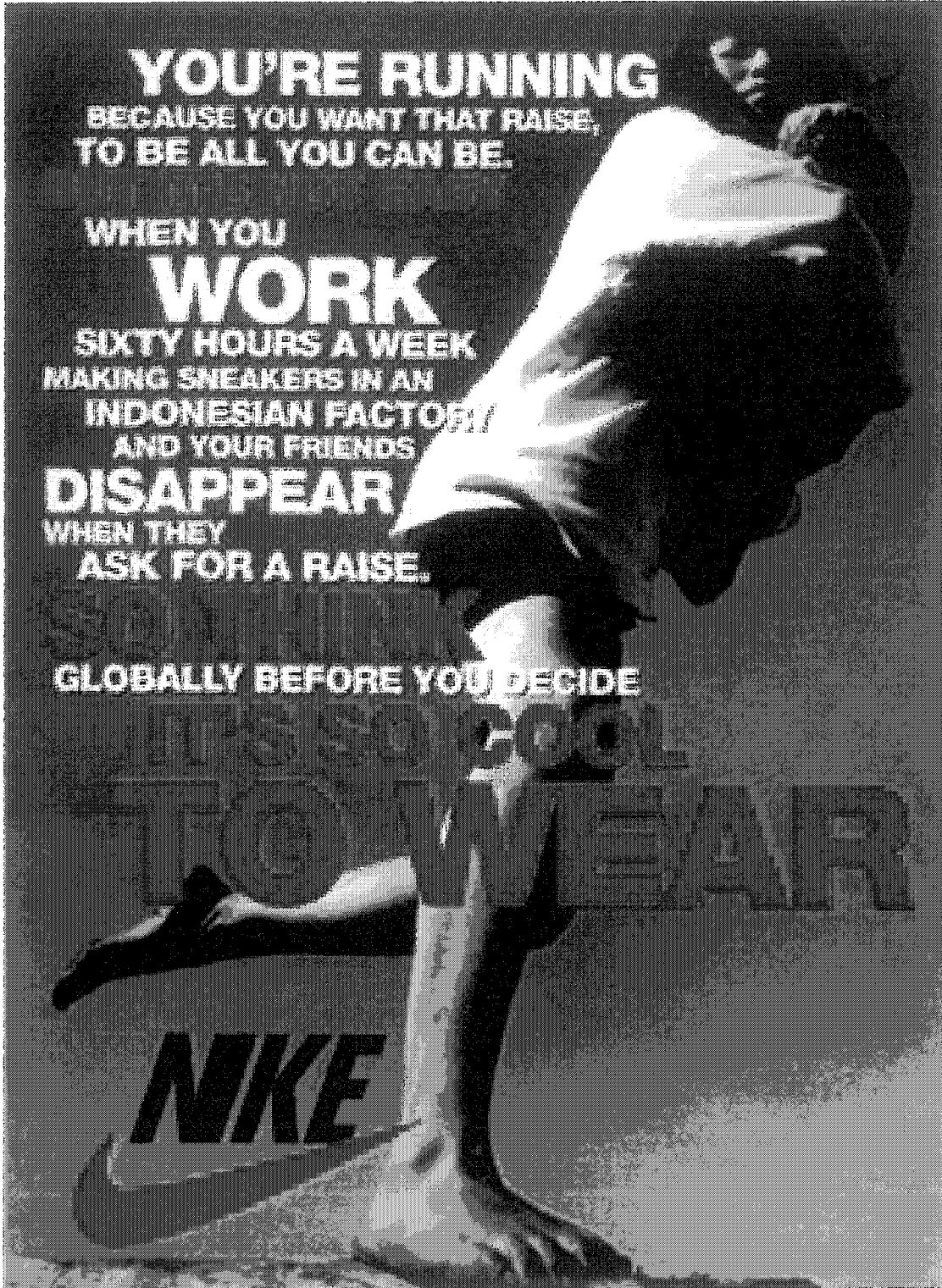
## **APPENDIX E**

### **ADBUSTERS CULTURE JAMS**



THE SURGEON GENERAL WARNS THAT SMOKING IS A FREQUENT CAUSE OF WASTED POTENTIAL AND FATAL REGRET.

(Source: [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org))



**YOU'RE RUNNING**

BECAUSE YOU WANT THAT RAISE,  
TO BE ALL YOU CAN BE.

WHEN YOU

**WORK**

SIXTY HOURS A WEEK  
MAKING SNEAKERS IN AN  
INDONESIAN FACTORY  
AND YOUR FRIENDS

**DISAPPEAR**

WHEN THEY  
ASK FOR A RAISE.

LOCALLY BEFORE YOU DECIDE

**NIKE**

(Source: [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org))



**NOVEMBER 29, 2002**

**BUY NOTHING DAY**