

# Function and Power of Language Study SACE Stage 1 Critical Literacy Option

## TOPIC: Whose Generation? An examination of the ways in which adolescence is represented in contemporary popular media.

### What is “adolescence”?

Using brief definitions and examples, attempt to answer this question in a way that relates directly to your choice of teenage type and particular study.

The dictionary gives three definitions which may be useful as a starting point. It can be defined very broadly as the state or process of growing up, or more precisely as the period of life from puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority (or legal adulthood). A third definition for adolescence when it is applied to more abstract things (like languages or cultures) is as a stage of development prior to maturity. The features of “adolescence” that these definitions emphasise most are perpetual change and the experience of being in-between. As a recent report into meeting the needs of the adolescent learner put it, “to understand the adolescent is to remember what it’s like to be ‘caught between childhood and adulthood’.”<sup>1</sup> This idea of adolescence as being on the threshold of the adult world – yearning for independence, achieving an authentic identity, but lacking the experience and maturity to fully realise such goals – is a very common one in popular media representations of the teenage years. Advertising generally finds the strongest appeals to teens being those that exploit desires for (a generally fantasised) adult experience, and a need for belonging to a valued group identity. Thus my study will focus on this feature of adolescence as a liminal experience, an experience of life on the threshold of adult possibilities.

### The power of popular culture’s media language

Make a general statement about how you have gone about analysing the language of your chosen texts, in such a way that your study reveals how it influences people.

The purpose of this study is to examine the way language is used in a social context – in this case, the popular media of TV, print and radio entertainment, information and advertising – to influence opinions and decisions made by teenagers in how they live their lives. To make it manageable, three texts have been chosen from a range of genres and media to examine how they may influence identities that teenagers either choose to adopt, or with which they feel they can identify. For this purpose I have used a semiotic analysis of how language operates through signs that can be decoded. As my examples are from advertising and TV entertainment, my analysis will seek to establish a link between specific features of popular culture’s media language and those media’s function to persuade teenagers to both spend money and enjoy themselves in specific ways.

### The “party animal”

Give a fairly detailed explanation of the aspects of adolescent experience that your chosen type seeks to represent.

The stereotype of adolescent experience that my research focussed on was that of the “party animal”. While all such attempts to categorise any identity (adolescent or otherwise) into a two dimensional type is both limiting and inaccurate, it is a technique of representation common to almost any text, whether literary, audio-visual or persuasive. The three texts that I chose to examine also contain other aspects or types that could be argued to represent adolescent behaviour and lifestyle differently. The “rebel” is one for example that particularly pertains to the character of Spike from *Buffey, the Vampire Slayer*. However, by looking at how specific features of the “party animal” are used to characterise the adolescent experience, I have attempted to show the power of popular culture’s media language to circumscribe teenage identity, without being comprehensive or definitive.

The general features of this type could be described as a determination to “have fun” at almost any cost, to reject any aspects of a lifestyle that may be considered restrained, well-balanced or generally “boring”. By contrast, the “party animal” seeks to embrace social entertainment almost as a career in itself. Links to the “rebel” can be seen in a rejection of conventional morality and standards of behaviour. Along with taking things to extreme and “living on the edge”, all such features coincide with some of the generally accepted psychological profile of adolescent behaviour – risk-taking, experimental and combining individuality with a group oriented focus.

Contemporary social activities that support the “party animal” as a valid teenage type are schoolies week, or the US equivalent ‘Spring Break’, a phenomenon that has grown significantly in popularity over the last 15 years, not to mention the older tradition of night clubbing, discos and post-1980s fashion surrounding acid-house music.

Analyse your three texts in turn, as stages in an argument supporting both your explanation of the “type” as well as the role of ‘language’ within the contexts of each text.

### Text 1 – Bacardi Breezer *Cat cam* TV advertisement<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Checkley, Kathy (2004) “Meeting the Needs of the Adolescent Learner”, *Education Update* Vol 46, #5, August 2004.

<sup>2</sup> adapted from Selfe, Melanie (2001) “Semiotics of Bacardi Breezer Commercials” <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/mes9901.html>

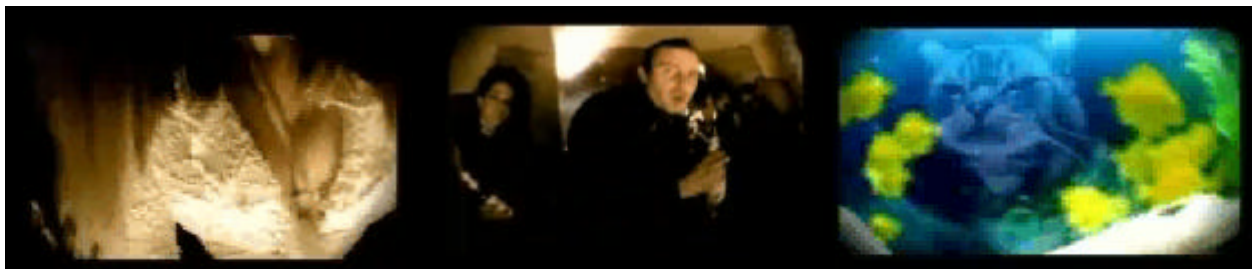
Bacardi Breezer is a rum based mixed drink. It comes in a number of bright fruit flavours, in predominantly clear packaging (showing the colours), and is designed to be drunk from the bottle. It arrived a little late into a market that had already acquired the alco-pop tag, and earlier campaigns strived to distance it from the associations of underage drinking through the use of a voiceover heavy, “guy walks into a bar...” anecdotal style series which focused on the whimsical relationship problems of 20 to 30 somethings (one character even had a beard). More recent campaigns from McCann-Erickson moved towards a youth market, stressing images of hedonism and freedom, and drawing sharp contrasts with older generations, classic features of a “party animal” stereotype that would fit comfortably with an adolescent age group. Summarized, the first campaign involved young people in formal situations (a job interview, meeting the in-laws, meeting a potential landlady) being questioned by mature adults who are coded by their clothing, mannerisms and the camera angles used as boring, severe and lacking humour. The responses they are given are illustrated as marginally truthful as the viewer is shown snippets of the central character partying (with lots of Bacardi Breezer). An interest in ornithology is depicted as watching scantily clad women dance – bird watching. At each turn there is a similar stretching of a linguistic sign; the connection can always be made through the use of slang and youth terms and this offers the target audience an ability to feel they have “got it”, connecting to the young vibrant characters though participation in the deception of those in a situation of power. Oppositions of age vs. youth are set up and illustrated through codes of colour – dull vs. vibrant, movement – stillness vs. speed, and sound – sparse & diegetic vs. lively music, and through these codes, connotative meanings are attached to the original binary opposition of age vs. youth; conformity vs. individuality; proper behaviour vs. hedonism; and respectability vs. enjoyment. Together these combine to give a sense that youth=freedom and age=restriction. These ads also develop a concept of the duality of young peoples lives: having to fit into established structures – day life; and being “themselves” – night life (in this series, not only restricted to after dark so perhaps also encompassing holiday life and student life). Many of these ideas that epitomise the “party animal” stereotype are continued in the new series but the age vs. youth binary has lost its confrontational, power aspect, and by replacing the human protagonists with a cat it has become possible to bypass some of the class specific connotations of youth activity (some of those partying shots smacked of the affluent pre-university “gap year” and those were very middle class in-laws).

In an article in *The Guardian*, Sarah O'Brien of McCann-Erickson says of the Tomcat campaign that the “aim was to attract more men without alienating women, who make up most of Bacardi's business” (Walters 2000: 45)<sup>3</sup>. This is a hard task; the entire product type has traditionally been seen as a woman's drink (at least within the legal, over 18s market), and the type of male oriented marketing traditionally used for beer and cider could prove offensive to women and incongruously ineffective on the target audience if transferred to a product with a lighter image. The solution they found was to transpose the qualities they wished to associate with the product onto the Tomcat character, simultaneously calling on behaviour myths of the male cat while sidestepping many of the gendered problems of human social interaction. The genesis for this is explained by O'Brien: “Cats were chosen because research shows that people think of them as cool. No one knows where they go at night, and that was the hook” (Walters 2000: 45).

In the ad from this campaign on which I have chosen to focus, *Cat cam*, the “party animal” type is given a far more obviously male targeted approach. The entire advert is shot in the first person/cat: we see what the cat sees. It begins with a shot of a TV showing footage of a small bird, bathing, with bird sound. Immediately we see that the shot looks unusually convex, this is something normally associated with nature programs' attempts to replicate animal vision. Cutting to a shot of the room (coded with unfashionably out-of-date decor and limited area) from the viewers position we pan left. This is a handheld canted move designed to give the impression of the inclination of a head; we are firmly in a point of view position but we have not been given the conventional establishing shot allowing us to understand whose point of view we are seeing. We tilt down to see a remote control on a jacket; the evenings options - night in with the telly or going out. At this point the non-diegetic music, all bass line, kicks in. The remote and jacket are pulled out of the bottom of the frame as the camera moves off. We do not as yet know we are seeing as a cat but the next shot through greenery at the window, looking down at a taxi and some men who call up “Tom, come on” confirms that there is something unusual about the framing, we are too low for person height. Exiting the flat we descend the stairs and then cut to the interior of the taxi. Although many of the codes of continuity editing do not seem to be operating, the strict condensation of time we expect in adverts is still being used. Within the taxi three young men are laughing and interacting animatedly, with each other and the camera/cat – the person who might buy this product has good mates. The music builds layers of instrumentation and we do not hear dialogue. The men are dressed smartly and fashionably, for a night out; an indication of the type of man the buyer of the product might be, or aspire to be. The taxi takes them from the exterior of the sixties built block of flats to a dark night club environment where ostentatiously dressed women (wearing fake furs - in this environment everyone can take on aspects of the feline) look in the widows, evoking both the forbidden of prostitution and the importance of the passengers as the door opens to reveal a red carpet. We get a very low shot and the cat/camera is then lifted and carried into the club. The club environment is luxurious, dark and fashionable and within it the cat/camera is able to move freely on many surface levels including the bar where the product is being served and consumed. Where the previous advert focused on the participation in dancing, normally portrayed as a female pleasure, and used brightly lit and spatially open framing to show this, in *Cat cam* the lighting is darker and the focus is on social interaction with the cat/camera able to break the conventional codes of personal distance, enticed, touched, kissed, by a succession of glamorous and sexually commodified women. Winked at and

<sup>3</sup> Walters, Jake (2001) ‘Top Cats’. *The Guardian Weekend* 10/11/01, pp 40-7

acknowledged by men, it does not arouse jealousy or possessiveness. Point-of-view shots that would be potentially highly offensive if tied to a human male protagonist, such as panning down a dancing woman's torso to her just parting legs; or just plain impossible when the shot cuts to another (seated) woman's legs akimbo which the camera passes through to reach a beckoning blonde, all become ingenious, part of the building enigma. The cat/camera is able to go anywhere, and without consequence. This culminates with an extreme close up of the blonde woman's ample cleavage which triggers a response, an envious acknowledgement of 'too far' (for both personal distance and televisual taste), from a male friend and he moves to leave.



Passing back through the foyer, we stop at the fish tank, glimpsed on the way in, and with a focus pull the reflected Tomcat is revealed as the fish dart away. This moment serves to solve the enigma (on first viewing), retrospectively associating the Tomcat character with all the action, and brings in the brand on the collar. It also changes the context of the camera's objectification of the women in the club – it's only a cat, not a leering bloke – while simultaneously reaffirming the predatory nature of all that has gone before by showing the cat's effect on its natural prey – the fish.

Within the context of an advert the use of camera has originality, but it is also directly referencing through camera work, club setting and the bass line, the controversial video for the Prodigy's song *Smack My Bitch Up*. In this, after a litany of offensive behaviour the protagonist is revealed in a mirror, to be against all expectation female. By borrowing from this, the advert not only references the trick ending, but also the controversy and the macho image of the band. The use of first person camera and frenetic pace also parallels the position of console game play, again traditionally conceived as a young, male pursuit. This neatly combines elements of the computer game "geek" and the socially offensive "rebel" with the "party animal" type that is much more directly associated with the product.

## Text 2 – Bundaberg Rum *Bundy Bear* magazine advertisement

Ensure that the analyses of Texts 2 & 3 expand on the ones before

In the same way that the Bacardi Breezer *Tom cat* campaign sidestepped many of the gender problems of social interaction, by using an animal mascot to express socially offensive masculinity through a coded and thus 'safer', more acceptable method, Bundaberg Rum's marketers took the already recognisable white bear logo of the Queensland produced spirit and elevated it to an anthropomorphic character embodying the qualities they wish to associate with the product. With a suitably bass voice that combined a hint of naturalism (for a talking bear) with connotations of Barry white style sexuality, the Bundaberg bear's TV appearances also carried associations of male pranks in the bearily (pun intended) disguised actor in a polar bear suit performances. This was enhanced by the "drop bear" routine of chatting up girls through the use of a practical joke (tall stories disguised as "local knowledge" about the behaviour of native fauna). The mascot's wearing of sunglasses and multi-talented performances with musical instruments added to its image of "cool" nonchalance and *savoir faire* in a wide range of contexts. As a "party animal", the Bundy bear emphasised masculine sexuality and power through humour and an understated self-awareness. Unlike the Bacardi cat's connotations of wily predatoriness, the Bundy bear was able to combine natural size and strength with tamer notions of teddy bear cosiness. The role of the mascot as "party animal" was also presented more in the light of a talented and generous host, rather than the more individualistic feline "life-of-the-party" tom cat who is out for oneself.

Unlike Bacardi Breezer's *Tom cat* however, one particular Bundy Bear TV ad did attract controversy in 2002 for explicitly equating alcohol consumption with sexual success. Disguised as an animal trophy on the wall of a pub, the Bundy Bear eavesdrops on a group of young women and then reports back to a group of young men, pointing out a particular one because she was heard to say that she wants a few drinks followed by a one-night stand.

The magazine ad in question takes none of these risks, but does draw upon a familiarity with the original TV campaign that established the meanings outlined above, as well as a 2003 sponsorship of the Wallabies' World Cup campaign. From the latter, it attempts to associate the product with a world travelling consumer base that is the young Aussie abroad, initially perhaps for sport – the "green-and-gold army" – but essentially for fun. This particular ad makes no specific reference to sport in fact, but it did come on the heels of the 2003 campaign.



The setting is a New York street at night, coded by yellow cabs, skyscrapers and neon signage declaring Times Square and various unidentifiable advertisements. Holding a bottle of rum in the centre foreground, the Bundy bear plays the role of tourist guide, encoded mainly by his gaze to camera and the foreign touristy background. His established Aussie character in such a setting also carries connotations of Crocodile Dundee. This icon of a larrikin Australian abroad associates the teenage backpacker / tourist as “party animal” with Mick Dundee’s movie exploits in New York. The headline is a piece of Australian slang, a classic “ockerism”, that asserts the authenticity not only of

the drink, but of a particular lifestyle choice and set of behaviours that are in reality quite extreme and cartoonish (what’s genuine about a polar bear behaving like a stereotypical Ocker in a fake New York streetscape?).

The technical codes of layout and font suggest either a web cam video capture or worn postcard photo, either of which suggest the authenticity of “being there”; while the photo itself uses a steeply angled street, overexposed night lights, bright colours and movement to suggest all the attributes of the “party animal’s” exciting night life, with the extra buzz of OS travel to iconic good time places (a phrase hinted at by a number of the neon signs). Here is the “party animal” abroad, epitomising that liminal experience of adolescence on the boundaries of adulthood (alcohol and independent foreign travel).

### **Text 3 – *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: “Never Leave Me” (series 7; episode 9) TV drama**

Although the character of Spike in Jos Whedon’s post-modernist gothic TV melodrama *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may at first glance appear to be the archetypal rebel – complete with black leather & T-shirt, bad attitude vampire habits and tight lipped delivery of knowing ironic dialogue – he is also characterised in his pre-reformed vampire days as William the Bloody by excess and amoral abandon. The complexity that his character is given in the later series (like this one) by his gaining a soul while retaining the irresistible primal urges of a vampire’s nature, certainly takes him beyond the role of stereotyping teenage experience in any narrow sense, but it does make him a far richer expression of those ideas about living on the threshold of life. The whole concept of vampirism lends itself to teenage anxieties about bodily urges, social rejection and the temptations of risk-taking behaviour. Combined with the intelligence and wit of the show’s creators and almost every episode has something either worthwhile or highly amusing to say about the lives of most teens.

In the case of Spike in “Never Leave Me”, the episode’s plot relies on a conceit of forcing him to go “cold turkey” as a way of discovering what has been encouraging him to revert to his old wicked ways of killing virgins for their blood. This in itself is rich with connotations of the party animal’s drug and alcohol fuelled culture and wild, self-indulgent, pleasure seeking lifestyle. The twist is that rather than use one’s cunning and skill to escape the prisons of conventional morality – as the Bacardi tom cat or Bundaberg bear do – Spike not only submits to his “treatment” but later begs for Buffy to destroy him when he realises that his inner urges will be beyond her ability to control him. After one escape from a bedroom prison, Spike is chained to the basement wall in the posture of a Christian martyr. He attempts to convince Buffy to destroy him by presenting her with a litany of his evil: “Do you know how much blood you can drink from a girl before she’ll die? I do.” The language is a cliché of dark Hollywood heroes facing their inner demons, made comically literal by the context of a real demon confessing his ‘natural’ unnatural acts. But the demands of the context – a reforming vampire talking about sucking blood from virgins – also enables an ironic reflection of the “party animal” stereotype, fuelled by artificial stimulants to prey on young girls for pleasure.

To a certain extent, this use of Spike as an anti-type of the “party animal” is in keeping with one of the shows most explicitly professed values – a feminist awareness that girls have as much right and wherewithal to do anything that guys can. It’s all there in the program’s title. What Spike offers the male “party animal” audience is the noble image of reform through masochistic endurance (it gets even worse for him in the remainder of the episode when the First Evil

gets hold of him for torture). The underlying feminism of the whole show is however somewhat disturbing, given that it merely inverts the old hierarchy by merely putting women in the position of abusive power that men normally have.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously the episode has far more in it that can also be usefully deconstructed. I gave the show its post-modernist tag because one of its greatest strengths is its witty and thorough use of referencing to almost every aspect of popular, high or low culture, including current events. Produced in 2003, like almost every American TV show after 9/11, it references the war on terror through its handling of the First Evil's international assault on the Watcher's Council. Having had many of their outposts destroyed and their organization crippled, the English head of the organisation Quentin Travers – looking and acting like a cross between James Bond's "M" and Harry Potter's Prof. Dumbledore – announces they will regroup and head to Sunnydale for a showdown, just before the penthouse headquarters are blown sky-high. The low camera angle exterior shot may have been a natural choice to show such an event, but it carried powerful echoes of the twin towers' demise.



Closer to our focus on stereotypes of adolescence is the episode's use of the "geek" in parallel with Spike's imprisoned "party animal". The character of Andrew is a Columbine High School type who, sick of a life of insignificance and victim hood, has succumbed to the influence of the First Evil and made a pact to gain absolute power. In a classic use of black humour typical of *Buffy*, Andrew's first and only murder to obtain a human sacrifice – of his best and even dorkier friend Jonathan – provided insufficient blood to make the charm work, and Andrew completely loses his nerve to kill again (even a pig!). While attempting to "work around" the problem of his squeamishness by buying the requisite amount of (pig's) blood from a butcher, he is caught by Buffy's friends and taken back to her house to be interrogated. From then on, the whole episode is structured around the juxtaposition of Spike's cold turkey and Andrew's interrogation: both are tied to chairs in neighbouring bedrooms, while the narrative shifts between the contrast of Buffy's compassionate treatment of Spike, who is suffering serious withdrawal, and a hilarious "good cop/bad cop" routine of Anya and Xander attempting to terrify Andrew into confession. Both "victims" are blonde and dressed in basic black, but that is where the "dork" as doppelganger of Spike ends. Where the Bacardi Breezer *Cat cam* ad amalgamates geek with rebel, through the technical codes of computer game editing speed and p-o-v camera combined with Prodigy video references, this episode of *Buffy* juxtaposes them through the powerfully self-tortured Spike and haplessly tortured Andrew. The symbolic code of their pairing through dress, appearance and narrative parallel is constantly undercut by characterisation and mood: Spike's English accented dialogue of repressed pain, Freudian analysis and sacrifice to the greater good is juxtaposed by Andrew's cowardice, weakness and comic pathos ("Ow! Watch it. That's my joystick hand" he says to Xander as he's adjusting the ropes on his chair).

## Conclusion

Your conclusion should not only summarise what all three text analyses add up to about your adolescent stereotype, including the actual effects such identities have on young people's real lives, but also identify where there are problems in your study. Try to link the texts to the corporation(s) behind their production and promotion.

In summary, we have seen advertising's use of the "party animal" to identify the liminal experience of adolescence, life on the threshold of adult possibilities, with unrestrained sexuality liberated from inhibition by alcohol. In stark contrast to this, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* introduces an ironic view of such a type undergoing reform. Clearly the former operates from within a commercial culture whose profits depend on promoting a pleasure seeking lifestyle that relies on the artificial stimulant of alcohol. It therefore wants to encourage teenagers to identify themselves with a need for social interaction that is reliant upon consumption, not one that is self-reliant, self-sustaining or in any way restrained. On the other hand, a TV drama that skirts the boundaries of socially accepted family values – especially in the Christian dominated context of US domestic entertainment – can not only afford to preach restraint in some areas but may require it to justify the violence, moral ambiguity and open sexuality that it portrays with equal enthusiasm. A more just and accurate analysis of *Buffy*'s part in the promotion or devaluation of the "party animal" type could only really be done by taking into account how its airtime was used commercially (what products and services took advantage of its audience), as well as the further spin-offs of its online presence, fan response and even re-runs. Unfortunately none of this was possible in the scope of this study.

About 4,000 words

<sup>4</sup> See the essay "It's About Power: Gender Dynamics in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" by Laura at <http://www.allaboutspike.com/gender.html>