

ADVERTISING AWARENESS

the ability to expose advertising discourses that undermine sustainability, and resist them

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Catching a glimpse into the deep insights about human needs that modern psychology has revealed requires little more than picking up the nearest magazine and critically analysing the advertisements within it. Since Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, first started applying his uncle's psychological theories to public relations and advertising in the 1920s, a significant proportion of the effort of modern psychology has been applied to the task of convincing people to consume. A magazine advertisement for a vacuum cleaner reads:

Life isn't always neat and tidy. It's about laughing, crying, loving, dancing, maybe even shouting. So we've developed the new QuickClick tool change system and the ComfoGlide floor tool, to save you energy and time to enjoy what we've all been put into the world to actually do. Live. (Kärcher advertisement 2006)

Bernays' vision was of harnessing humans' dangerous and irrational desires and instinctive biological drives - like the desire to laugh, cry, love, dance and shout, perhaps - and channelling them into something safer and more economically productive, like consuming and producing vacuum cleaners (see Curtis 2002). It is easy to see how Bernays' ideas could arise in his historical context: a deep suspicion of human emotional drives following the rise of the Nazis, and, after the war, a massive over-production capacity that needed to be met with increased consumption. The idea was to divert dangerous libidinal energy into the harmless and economically beneficial pursuit of consumerism. The context now, though, is very different, as over-consumption and the ecological damage it causes threaten the future ability of the Earth to support human life and the life of countless other species.

Despite the change in context, the legacy of Bernays exists in a clearly identifiable discourse of modern advertising. This discourse calls on deep human desires and needs to sell people unnecessary things which will not, in the end, come close to satisfying those needs. A vitamin advertisement shows a woman deeply peaceful in a yoga posture, but suggests 'For the inner journey, take an alternative route.' The question is: why buy a product which is unlikely to lead to a deep state of peace, with money that needs to be earned in a stressful job, when all that is necessary is some time out and a few stretches to actually feel more peaceful. Another advertisement, for bathroom cleaner, shows a glorious picture of nature but then suggests 'Enjoy the freshness of the outdoors in the safety of your own home', as if the synthetic aromas bathroom cleaners are a convenient substitute for the freshness of nature. A mobile phone advertisement shows people enjoying a moment of real connection and joy as they dance together on a platform in Liverpool Street Station, followed by the message 'Life's for sharing' superimposed on someone who is not dancing at all but instead talking on a mobile phone, as if it was somehow equivalent.

Countless advertisements use images of happy times spent with friends, exercise in the fresh air, explorations of nature, dancing, peaceful moments, romance, and other aspects of life which in themselves require very little or no consumption of resources or production of waste.

They then use these images to sell material products which are often not only unnecessary but ecologically damaging to produce and dispose of. Advertisements can therefore be useful for stimulating reflection on ways of genuinely fulfilling higher human needs and the forces which distract people away from these needs towards unnecessary material consumption.

The particular discourse described above could be called the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse since the advertisements unrealistically represent a material product as a substitute for, or path towards gaining, something that will satisfy deep human needs. Learners can actively explore the discourse for themselves by searching through magazines (particularly the kind of magazines they typically read), and selecting advertisements which depict experiences they consider to be life enhancing. This is a valuable process in itself because it requires reflection on higher human needs and their fulfilment (see *Emotional Wellbeing*, this volume). Learners can expose the model behind the discourse and express it in their own way (e.g., “material consumption is the path to deep fulfilment”). The validity of the model can be investigated at a personal level through visualisation exercises such as imagining the feelings that arise from being in the places depicted in the advertisements (in nature, spending happy times with friends, close moments with family, dancing, being physically active, discovering romance etc.), compared to what the products themselves (toilet cleaner, sugary drink, junk food, mobile phone, trainers, perfume) can actually deliver.

Central to sustainability literacy is awareness of the *consequences* of discourses for the sustainability of society (Stibbe 2008). In the case of the pseudo-satisfier discourse, the consequences are not only in terms of the ecological impact of the products, but also on the social sustainability of generating material aspirations that are unfulfillable for all, and the personal sustainability of a life of over-consumption, debt, clutter and stressful work to pay for it all. Awareness is only the first step, however. The next step, and an essential one for sustainability literacy, is the ability to take *action*, in this case the ability to resist the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse. Resistance could be at a personal level by avoiding products which are unlikely to satisfy higher needs, and searching for genuine satisfiers instead (see *Finding Meaning Without Consuming*, this volume). Or it could be at a social level, raising public awareness of the negative impact of advertising, or campaigning against certain forms of advertising such as those which try to associate junk food with family love in the minds of children.

One activity which involves learners in learning-through-action (i.e., learning through actual awareness raising activities rather than just ‘exercises’) is the creation of a public exhibition of counter-advertisements along the lines of *Adbusters*:

Group Activity

- Carefully analyse a range of spoof advertisements from the Adbusters website (see figure 1 at the end of the chapter as an example). Describe the discourses that are being resisted, the reasons for resistance, and the visual and linguistic techniques used to create the spoofs.
- Now look through ordinary magazines to find an advertising discourse that you feel needs to be resisted from a sustainability perspective. Discuss what it is about the discourse which potentially undermines sustainability.
- Create a spoof advertisement for public display which resists the discourse.

For the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse, spoof advertisements could be created by simply altering slogans of actual advertisements so that they promote the life-enhancing, low consumption activities that the advertisements actually depict, rather than the product. A cola advertisement which shows friends having fun together could be changed from ‘Coke is it!’ to ‘Time with friends is it!’; ‘Enjoy the freshness of the outdoors in the safety of your own home’ could become ‘Enjoy the freshness of the outdoors’; ‘For the inner journey, take an alternative route’ could become ‘For the inner journey, stretch your body and relax deeply’. In general, there are many genuinely satisfying and completely free experiences which could be promoted for general health, wellbeing and sustainability, but it is exactly these which are excluded from being advertising directly because no-one profits in an immediate financial sense. This is clearly one of the forces behind the unsustainability of society, but one that learners can become actively involved in resisting through exercises such as this.

The *pseudo-satisfier* discourse is, of course, just one of the discourses within the world of advertising with potential implications for sustainability. There are many others, such as the *dissatisfaction-manufacturing* discourse (‘Discoloured toenails? Now there’s no need to hide them’), the *convenience-constructing* discourse (‘Royal Grass [artificial grass] makes gardening a pleasure’), the *greenwash* discourse (‘exploration of space has changed how we live and think from global communications to a better understanding of climate change’ – from a space tourism advertisement), and even a *climate change* discourse (‘HOPE – Hummer Owners Prepared for Emergencies’, from an advertisement which implies that the best way to prepare for climate catastrophe is to buy a Hummer). All of these discourses have particular models of the world behind them. The *convenience-constructing* discourse reproduces a model where physical activity (mowing the grass) is ‘inconvenient’ but stress and ill-health from sedentary work in order to afford a life of over-consumption is not. The *greenwash* discourse implies a model where environmentally damaging pursuits (like driving or space tourism) are ‘green’ because of irrelevant factors such as improved fuel efficiency or a vague connection to climate change research.

It would not be possible for learners to be ‘taught’ the many discourses of advertising and the models behind them because they are in a continual state of change, and each learner will have their own evolving model of sustainability to gauge discourses against. Instead, learners can prepare themselves to engage with any discourse they come across in the future through gaining skills in critical discourse analysis and the ability to resist discourses which they feel could potentially damage them personally and undermine the sustainability of the society they live in.

To summarise, then, this chapter looked at the *pseudo-satisfier* discourse in advertising, and described some forms of active learning for investigating and resisting it. Exploring this particular discourse is valuable in itself because learners can go beyond awareness of how advertising promotes ecologically damaging over-consumption, to reflection on genuine, non-consumptive ways to fulfil higher human needs. It also provides a starting point for gaining broader skills in engagement with discourses through four main steps: *recognising patterns*, *exposing underlying models*, *reflecting on the consequences of models for sustainability* and *taking action*. The final stage, *taking action* includes resistance of negative discourses, but can also include the creation or promotion of positive discourses, ones which learners feel are more likely to contribute to a more sustainable society. Overall, a discursive approach like this is intended to involve learners in critical awareness of, and active engagement in, the

social structures around them that ultimately determine whether the society they are part of is sustainable.

Achbar, Mark and Jennifer Abbott and Joel Baker (2005) *The corporation*. Vancouver: Big Picture Media [This inspiring documentary film explores the psychology of corporations as well as psychological techniques used in advertising]

Adbusters. www.adbusters.org [Includes spoof advertisements and the *Journal of the Mental Environment*]

Curtis, Adam (2002) *Century of the self*.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/century_of_the_self.shtml [This acclaimed BBC documentary examines the rise of the all-consuming self against the backdrop of the Freud dynasty]

Language and Ecology Research Forum. www.ecoling.net [The forum includes a wide range of resources for analysing discourses from a sustainability perspective, including the online journal *Language & Ecology*]

Fairclough, Norman (2001) *Language and power*. London: Longman [Includes a useful Critical Discourse Analysis approach to advertising]

Stibbe, Arran (2008) Reading and writing society: the role of English subjects in Education for Sustainability. *The Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre Newsletter*, 14. www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue14 [a more detailed exploration of the relationship between sustainability literacy and Critical Discourse Analysis]