

Written Task 2: How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?

Candidate Name:

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Session:

Written Task Word Count: 999 words

Part 2: Language and Mass Communication

Question: How and why is a social group represented in a particular way?

Text: *Women's Health* South Africa, January/February 2012

Focus: How are women represented in this magazine cover as needing to change their lives in order to become happier?

Outline

Introduction: Magazine covers are used to advertise what is inside the magazine, and they do this through cover lines that reflect the content. These are placed and designed strategically, and both the visual and written modes encourage women to lose weight or change their appearance, because it is suggested that this will make them happier. This written task explores how and why women are represented in this way, and social implications that follow from this.

Key Points:

Social assumptions: Through relying on existing social assumptions that are integrated in the cover lines, readers are subconsciously encouraged to accept these assumptions and fill the dialogic space between the text and the reader. This is done through verb form choice and rhetorical devices. This in turn encourages women to think in a certain way, in this case to believe that changing themselves will make them happy. It can follow that such behavioral modification involves consumption, which is vital to the maintenance of capitalist societies, which is in this case the economic context in which the text exists.

Graphology of the text: The graphosemantics of the largest cover line subconsciously influences women to think that losing weight is a positive change in all instances, expressed through the high modality of the demands, which is constructed through the shape, size, and semantics of the phrase. This is further seen in peripheral cover lines, creating an intratextual effect.

Representation of model: The model is the main image and only picture on the cover, and her specific body language shapes what the reader may think. This image combined with the informal choice of words in the accompanying cover lines creates an intermodal message to further the suggestion that women will become happier through changing their thinking and therefore actions.

Written Task 2

Magazine covers both reflect culture and construct cultural values; they shape societies around the world. This (Appendix 1) January 2012 cover of South African *Women's Health* is an example of this construction. Its purpose is to preview what is inside the magazine to persuade the audience, South African women, to buy the magazine. In a cultural context where the standards of physical beauty are so clearly defined, this magazine encourages women to lose weight to be happy, effectively manipulating their emotions to sell copies, highlighting the capitalist economic context in which the text exists. It is published at the beginning of the year, a time in which many women decide to lose weight as part of their new year's resolution. Thus, the publisher aims to satisfy these needs. Considered through a feminist lens, this critical response will explore how and why women are represented as needing to change their physical appearance to be happier.

One way in which women are persuaded to change is through the social context, leaving dialogic spaces for the reader to fill. The most prevalent assumption is that women need to be thinner to be happy. The question, 'Will being thinner make you happy?' creates a friendly dialogue aimed to arouse curiosity. The pronoun 'you' highlights the reader's importance through synthetic personalization. The rhetorical question already contains the answer, suggesting that the answer is yes, therefore leaving the readers to fill the dialogic space and commit to buying the magazine of their own accord. Furthermore, the comparative verb form of 'thinner' suggests that there is room for improvement in any reader, rather than them being happy with what they have. Below this, a minor cover line declares 'real women's weight loss revelations'. In a sociolinguistic sense, the pre-modification of the noun appeals to the social context that 'real' women have high authority, without precisely defining what 'real' women are. Using a referential function, objective information is conveyed in a personal sense. The contrast between most women in real life not being skinny and the magazine's suggestion of the opposite shows how these texts can reflect and modify societal behaviors and attitudes. Another assumption being made is that every woman wants to be more beautiful. Although the text does not explicitly claim that losing weight will make the reader happy, it relies on and interacts with other cover lines, to persuade the public that being beautiful will make women happy.

Women are also encouraged to lose weight through the graphosemantic effect of the visual and written modes. The main cover line encourages women to 'drop two sizes!' in large, bolded, black font, establishing high modal authority. An English-reading audience will reflexively be drawn to the top left hand corner, and the size of the text may also attract the reader's attention, making it the first thing they read. The shape of the round letters in 'drop' and 'two' connote round stomachs, and the curved letters in 'sizes' suggest a sleeker, ideal body as a result at the end of the claim. The imperative form of the verb 'drop' also commands the reader to follow the order, combined with the exclamation mark at the end, suggesting a sense of urgency, imploring the reader to change. The curves of the 'S's reflect the curved body of the model suggest that obtaining her body is a product of following advice in the magazine, once again implying that being thinner is beautiful and better. Juxtaposing text with the smiling face of Zoë Saldana implies the positivity that will come from losing weight. The cover further suggests that women can change themselves by 'train(ing) less' and 'lose(ing) more'. The antithesis in this statement creates a sense of simplicity in the task of losing weight, as it takes minimal effort. The interaction of these stylistic features contributes to the prevailing representation that changing their body will make women happier.

Another way in which women are encouraged to look better in order to feel better is through the subjective commentary and representation of Zoë Saldana. The cover model has been digitally altered to look slimmer, as a result of the technological context of Photoshop, despite being described as 'totally uncensored'. The informal discourse is a typical convention of magazine covers, utilized to create synthetic personalisation between the author and the reader. A very small percentage of women will be able to obtain this body, but suggesting that this is normal encourages women to see improvements that they could make. The caption stating that Saldana is 'strong' and 'sexy' uses sibilance to create harsh but sleek sounds, suggesting a 'trendy' person that the readers should strive to be. Additionally, the positive verbs promote the model instead of diminishing her. However, this assumes that the accompanying connotations are positive, which some readers may reject. The image takes up a lot of space, and her posture physically opens her body, connoting self-confidence and importance. Her clothing is casual, which could imply that anyone can look like her: a true 'real' woman. Her representation as carefree and beautiful combined with the complimenting

cover lines encourage women to believe that changing themselves physically will make their lives better.

Women are represented as needing to change to be happy through the semantics of the textual mode and their relationship with the graphosemantics of the visual mode, but why they are represented in this way is due to the standing assumptions of society and culture. The cover represents women in a certain way to appeal to female readers, and simultaneously suggests that changing appearance will make women happier. This cover can be viewed as a cultural artifact that both reflects and constructs societal values. The consumer society of our time dictates that readers' insecurities should be manipulated to sell copies and further a business. This magazine cover represents women as having to look better in order to be happy, but this exactly must change if the women of the next generation are to be happy with themselves as they are.

- 999 words

Works Cited:

Women's Health South Africa January/February 2012: Front Page. Print.

Appendix:

Appendix 1

