

# Consumption, Identity, and Embodiment in a Suburban Los Angeles High School

## Introduction

Branded, gendered images popularized by television programming and magazines are made relevant to the everyday lives of youth as they are linked to high school status systems. These systems are produced and reproduced through the negotiation of moral norms and beliefs in local membership contexts.

In 2005, I audio-recorded 60 hours of speech used by a group of middle-class, multiethnic high school cheerleaders at an all-girl school in suburban Los Angeles; **Los Angeles being a locale heavily invested in a particular consumer culture of expensive products and idealized body images.** I look at evaluative speech fragments produced in small friendship groups.

## Theoretical Framework

- Adolescent girls are increasingly invested in the gendered discourses of popular media and consumer culture (Coates 1999).
- Branded, gendered images are linked to high school status systems (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, Bucholtz 2007).
- Identity and affiliation demonstrated by youth through language, consumption, and bodily presentation (Mendoza-Denton 2008).
- Communities of Practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992)
  - Styles unique to CA.
- Morality and Evaluative speech:
  - Assessments (Pomerantz 1984, Goodwin and Goodwin 1992)
  - Stance/alignment through turn-taking (DuBois 2007, Goodwin 2006)
  - Self-deprecating narratives problematizing levels of body fat (Nichter 2001)

## Methods

- Research based on fieldwork conducted June 2005-September 2005 at an all-girl high school in suburban Los Angeles..
- Participant Observation.
- Field-notes.
- 60 hours of audio-recorded speech.
- Transcription/Conversation Analysis

## Community

- 11 Girls, Ages 14-17
- Multicultural – White, Latina, Filipino, Multiple Ethnicity
- Middle/Upper-middle class
- Live within 30 mile radius to school
- Shared Catholic faith
- Members of the high school Varsity Cheer Team

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## Abstract

Focusing on evaluative speech fragments produced in friendship groups in a high school community of practice, this data demonstrates how Los Angeles youth construct their social worlds through not only their consumption practices, but also through a corresponding language of consumption, produced in peer groups (Bucholtz 2007).

## Data

### 1) IT'S LIKE HER CLOTHES

- 1 G1: Sasha is like SO:: skinny, oh my Go::d  
2 like I totally wish I had her body sometimes  
3 G2: I think she looks kinda gross  
4 like that girl is bone  
5 G3: yeah hot  
6 G1: like she totally looks like Giselle (Victoria Secret lingerie model)  
7 G2: uhhh yeah right, maybe like Giselle's flat-chested cousin  
8 G4: hahah  
9 G2: no but seriously, like it's her clothes.  
10 i saw her at Abercrombie last weekend  
11 that stuff makes you look skinny  
12 like you always look small  
13 G3: yeah but like you look small if you are small  
14 G1: ye:::ah bu:t like only skinny people shop at Abercrombie in the first place  
15 you have to be hot to feel comfortable going in there  
16 its cause it's supposed to feel like a club  
17 like loud music and sexy people

### 2) CHEAP GLITTER

- 1 G1: so like e:ww  
2 her makeup was really gross, she's so gross  
3 G2: hahaha, not kewl no:::t kewl  
4 like all that silver glitter and shit  
5 G1: uh so like where does she even pick that stuff up? (.)  
6 hahaha  
7 G3: hahaha  
8 G2: no but it's like, like seriously  
9 where does she even shop  
10 G4: haha like Target or something maybe?  
11 G5: ta:::rja:::y  
12 G1: hahaha  
13 G2: yeah she's into the cheap stuff  
14 like when we go shopping, she's always into the crap  
15 like it's ki:nda embarrassing  
16 G1: ew well like have fun with that,  
17 tell her not to go blind for me hahah  
18 G5: that is so mean, oh my Go:::d  
19 G2: dude no but it's true  
20 that girl like needs to get herself to a MAC counter

### 3) COURTNEY'S PANTS

- 1 G1: Damn::: Courtney...  
2 your ASS looks Glnormous in those pants, hahaha.  
3 Oh my god::: Hahah.  
4 G2: For reals hahaha.  
5 G3: Hahahaha Courtney's got back:::. Hahaha.  
6 G1: Hahaha du:::umb.  
7 G4: Courtney, your ASS is HUGE!!  
8 G5: [Courtney] You KNOW it. Hahaha.  
9 G2: No but really Courtney.... You look pretty hot.



## Analysis

- Borrowing from **'Valley Girl' talk**, a style specific to California used to mark youth middle-class identity.
  - "Like": Example 1, Lines 1, 2, 4, 12, 13, 14, 17  
Example 2, Lines 1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 14, 15, 16
  - "Kewl": Example 2, Line 3
  - "Dude": Example 2, Line 19
  - "Oh my God": Example 1, Line 1; Example 2, Line 18, Example 3, Line 3
- **Evaluative commentary** and moral assessment of branded items & stores.
  - Example 1:
    - Line 11: that stuff makes you look skinny (in reference to Abercrombie & Fitch)
    - Line 17: like loud music and sexy people
  - Example 2:
    - Line 10, 11: G4: haha like Target or something maybe?. G5: ta:::rja:::y
    - Line 14, 15: like when we go shopping, she's always into the crap, like it's ki:nda embarrassing
- Identity, bodily presentation, and embodiment.
  - Example 1
    - Line 14, G1: ye:::ah bu:t like only skinny people shop at Abercrombie in the first place
  - Example 2
    - Line 17: tell her not to go blind for me hahah
  - Example 3
    - Line 2: your ASS looks Glnormous in those pants, hahaha.
    - Line 7: G4: Courtney, your ASS is HUGE!!

## Conclusion

- Girls embody the projected images of consumer brands, linking clothing and labels to idealized body images and lifestyles belonging to a middle-class identity.
- This middle-class identity is marked through speech style (Valley talk) as well as practice-produced moral evaluation.
- Los Angeles youth construct their social worlds through not only their consumption practices, but also through a corresponding language of consumption.
- This research is significant for understanding California as it explores the ways in which Los Angeles moral values negate European values in favor of glamour and glitz (Davis 1990).

