

**The popularity of tabloids: A reception analysis of the *Daily Sun* amongst
Grahamstown readers.**

By

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ABSTRACT

Tabloid journalism has and continues to spark controversy. Scholarly considerations of tabloid journalism often question its contribution to democratic causes. However, little academic attention has been given to the question of how tabloids are understood and evaluated by their audiences. This study considered a range of audience responses to the *Daily Sun* by analysing the way some of its readers understand and evaluate it. The study examined the appeal of this popular tabloid to some Grahamstown readers. Reception analysis was employed to determine why these people read the *Daily Sun*. In particular, the active audience theory was used as a framework to conduct the research. To achieve the objectives of the study, qualitative research methods such as focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews were employed. Looking at the findings, many of the respondents acknowledged they read the tabloid for interpersonal communication, diversion and entertainment. The results also revealed that their lived context plays a major role in their reading of stories. In a wider context, the research contributes to an understanding of the popularity of tabloid newspapers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Introduction

My first encounter with the *Daily Sun* was in 2002 when I saw a tattered copy of the issue in my colleague's room in a students' residence. I was amused by the headline "Raped by a Gorilla" and surprised at what seemed to me then, its unusually provocative content. I began seeing the paper more frequently, drawn by headlines like 'The Girls who Pee Spoons', 'Boyfriend Ate My Baby', and many others on the newsstands. These experiences, as well as my personal observation of its popularity, evidenced by its presence on supermarket newsstands, and in taxis, buses and waiting rooms—motivated this study.

Media critics argue that tabloid newspapers are illiberal, reactionary, negative, and pessimistic and infected with a sentimentality which appeals to readers' emotions, rather than their intellect (Ornebring & Jonsson, 2004:280). Debatable features of the newspapers include the typically sensationalist and personalised news style, the blurring of boundaries between what is private and public, and politics and entertainment (Franklin, 1997: 4). Their populist and partisan political interventions, their celebrity-orientated and sexualised news agenda, as well as the use of aggressive journalistic methods such as cheque-book journalism and paparazzi coverage have made them controversial (Wasserman, 2007: 5). In sum, tabloids are perceived as pushing the media towards increased sensationalism, entertainment and 'sound-bite' journalism, and in so doing advancing the tabloidisation of mainstream media (Wasserman, 2007: 6). However, despite this controversy and the wide reach of tabloids, research into their reception amongst audiences is scarce (see Tomaselli, 2000; Wasserman, 2006; 2008; Smith, 2007; Townsend, 2006). Questions like why they are popular and what readers make of them have rarely been addressed. This

study seeks to do so, by researching the reception of the *Daily Sun* amongst some of its Grahamstown readers.

Background to the Study

This study draws on previous studies of tabloid journalism. Earlier studies have concentrated on two main positions on tabloid newspapers. On the one hand, they are criticised as a threat to democratic processes because of the way they sensationalise news; on the other, they are conceived as liberating and playful (Sparks, 2000: 8). Such polarisation does not give a precise picture of the nuances involved in tabloid reading. It also highlights how ideas about the role of tabloids in society are mostly based on assumptions about readers drawn from views of the newspaper content. This study thus seeks to discuss tabloid journalism and its place in South African society based on interviews with Grahamstown readers. The aim of the study is to establish why readers in Grahamstown are attracted to the newspaper, and what place it has in their lives. Grahamstown is a city in the Eastern Cape Province of the Republic of South Africa. It is the seat of the Makana municipality, with a population of 41,799, of which 77.4% is black, 11.8% Coloured, 10% white, and 0.7% Asian (Makana Municipality, 2003). I have based my study on this community because I lived there during the period of my study, and have established, through conversations, that many *Daily Sun* readers use its content as a basis for their ongoing discussions. The *Daily Sun* has estimated daily sales of 4 755 000, and a readership of 2.29 million—the highest in the country (SAARF, 2007). (For a detailed account of circulation trends and readership profiles of the *Daily Sun* readers, see appendices 1-3).

Objectives of the Study

The aim of the research is to discover the meanings that readers derive from the *Daily Sun*, and how these meanings are shaped by the paper's communicative strategies. In this way I hope to shed light on the popularity of the *Daily Sun*, and to gain a richer understanding of how it fits into or mediates the everyday lives of its readers. This research is thus a contribution to the continuing debates about tabloid journalism, in

which, as stated above, little academic attention in South Africa has been given to readers' concerns and their attraction to tabloids. Another objective is to show how an understanding of the consumption of tabloid news can complement, as well as challenge theories of the place of tabloid journalism in society.

Methodology

To generate data on why people read the *Daily Sun*, my study is grounded in reception analysis which is predicated upon a qualitative approach to research: the empirical methods of data collection which are most often associated with reception analysis (Jensen, 1986: 4). In keeping with reception theory, the study makes a comparative analysis of 'media discourses' with 'audience discourses' in order to examine the processes that have a bearing on the use of content of the newspaper (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990: 219; Jensen, 1988: 3). In light of this, although I will only report on the audience aspect of the research, my study will adopt a three-stage design: preliminary qualitative content analysis, followed by focus group and individual interviews. The textual analysis of the newspaper serves as a backdrop to the readership research. This combination of methods, detailed in Chapter 3, paves the way for a multi-faceted analysis of tabloid reading, taking into account individual and social contexts for the reading as well as how the paper communicates with its readers.

Tabloids and the Public Sphere

The basis of the critique of tabloid journalism is Habermas' (1989) notion of the public sphere. Traditionally viewed as a space where matters of political concern can be discussed, the notion of a public sphere remains relevant to discussions about tabloids and the use of this space for dialogue, debate and discussion (Smith, 2007: 15). In his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas conceptualises the idea of a public as that body of private persons gathered to discuss matters of public 'concern' or common interest (1989: 49). The public sphere, neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests, relies on rational-critical debate between private individuals on public matters, to which access

is guaranteed to all citizens. Based on the 18th century European bourgeois model of the society, Habermas acknowledges that in contemporary society, the media are the principal transmitters of information that would make such communication possible. For Habermas, the public sphere envisages citizens actively questioning state authority and the excesses of commercial interests (Habermas, 1989: 50).

However, it is essential to note that we have gone rather far from the forms of societal organisation where dialogue and face-to-face communication are viable instruments for day-to-day democracy (Thompson, 1995: 247). Consequently, the bourgeois or liberal model of the public sphere is no longer feasible in present day conditions. Therefore, participating in the political arena in the way described by Habermas is not viable. Instead, public life is marked by mediated publicness, or a mediated public sphere (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 285). While the central struggle in the bourgeois public sphere was the struggle of one particular class to find a new place in society, the central struggle in the mediated public sphere is the struggle for visibility, that is, the struggle to be heard and seen in the first place (Thompson, 1995: 247). This struggle for visibility implies that there might not be just one mediated public sphere, but instead the media landscape could be described as constituting a hegemonic as well as a number of alternative spheres, where different people debate a variety of issues in diverse ways (Thompson, 1995: 247; Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 285). This perspective was advanced by Fraser (1989, 1992), who argues that Habermas "...stresses the singularity of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, its claims to be the public arena, in the singular" (Fraser, 1992: 122). The central unity and all-encompassing nature of the bourgeois public sphere is an integral part of its attractiveness as an ideal: each person taking part in public life, playing by the rules of rational debate and equality. Instead, it has been suggested that building possibilities for alternative public spheres to exist and thrive is a better way to encourage democratic participation and open public debate:

I contend that in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public. (Fraser, 1992: 122) ...This historiography records that members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of colour, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative

publics. I propose to call these subaltern counter publics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities interests and needs. (Fraser, 1992: 123)

However, it must be noted that Habermas and Fraser followed different theoretical and empirical agendas. Habermas seemed to be interested in the public sphere as a locus for political power, while Fraser examined the role of the public sphere as an arbiter of cultural recognition (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 285). Although these are related, the emancipatory potential of the public sphere will obviously be judged differently depending on whether the main standard is equality of power or equality of recognition (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 285).

Many media scholars have used the concept of the public sphere both to describe and evaluate the role of the mass media—particularly news—in public life. The same concept can also be used to evaluate the role of tabloid journalism in society. It has been argued that the main function of journalism is to keep the citizens informed about current events so as to make rational political decision-making possible (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 283). In other words, the hegemonic view of journalism is that it enables the Habermasian ideal of rational public discourse.

Tabloid journalism has for the most part been judged to fail this ideal (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 283). The basic thrust of the criticism against tabloid journalism is that its form of journalistic representation does not adhere to the normative ideals of journalism regarding the representation of social and political issues (Gripsrud, 1992: 91). In particular, tabloids appear to be increasingly dominated by a focus on issues relating to daily life and scandals, rather than ‘politics’, thereby failing to inform citizens about the kinds of events necessary to make rational political decisions regarding their governance (Gripsrud, 1992: 91).

Conversely, despite engaging in a sensationalist and emotional mode of address when they give ordinary people the opportunity to tell their struggles of the everyday into the public arena, popular journalism can provide an alternative public sphere (see Örnebring & Jönsson 2004; 2006). This analysis is in line with a ‘more cultural understanding’ of the public sphere than the dominant view of the news media as “democracy’s watchdog” (Hermes, 2006: 29). Arguments in support of tabloids focus on their role as a form of journalism which talks to the needs of ‘ordinary’ people and profiles the realities of working class people in particular (Smith, 2007: 14).

South African tabloids for instance, focus on issues of importance to a section of the South African population, that is, the majority who have been neglected by mainstream media because they had not been seen as a lucrative audience (Wasserman, 2008:6). An essential perception on tabloids in the South African context is the view that popular culture functions as a practice of politics when groups or individuals that are excluded from traditional social and political channels use it as a means of political expression (Van Zoonen, 2000:13). Thus, for Wasserman, South African tabloids speak to the section of the population bearing the burden of the legacies of apartheid, which impact adversely on the extent to which they can actively participate in political debate in the public sphere (Wasserman, 2008: 6). Popular media broadens the bourgeois public sphere by validating a more diverse spectrum of topics and styles considered worthy of public discussion (Van Zoonen 2000: 13). Likewise, the *Daily Sun* is seen as being “embedded” in the community, covering stories from a different perspective than the elite mainstream, as an ongoing engagement with its readers’ everyday lived reality (see Harber, 2005).

In that way, tabloids also contribute to public dialogue, which in a democratic country like South Africa, reflects both a move away from the historical marginalisation of the country’s majority, and the reproduction of a public sphere which is the preserve of the ruling minority and the elites (Joseph, 2005: 30). It may therefore be argued that tabloidisation may have led to a reconceptualisation of the public sphere (Ornebring and Jönsson, 2004: 284). In light of this argument, tabloid journalism is not seen as detracting from the media’s democratic function, but as enhancing it, as it helps to

constitute an alternative public sphere (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 285). The tabloid press is thus a potentially important and influential contributor to public discourse, and so constitutive of a public sphere, which complements the role of traditional or normative journalism to a democracy (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 284).

Defining tabloids

It is difficult to give a complete definition of the term 'tabloid', as its characteristics are hard to pin down with precision. The term 'tabloid' was initially derived from the pharmaceutical trademark for the concentrated form of medicines as a tablet which is easily swallowed (Fang, 1997: 103). The connotation of the narcotic tablet effect was applied to the "compressed" journalism that condensed stories into a simplified, easily absorbed format (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 287). Currently, 'tabloidisation' is a concept used by journalists, media critics, and academics to characterise a contemporary trend in the mass media which is seen as a departure from what is normatively understood to be journalism's purpose: to provide citizens with information they need to be self-governing (Esser, 1999: 291). Tabloids have been defined as "paper(s) whose stock in trade is the human interest, graphically told story, heavy on pictures and short, pithy, highly stereotyped prose", and tabloidisation has become associated with the newspaper trend towards covering celebrity gossip and scandals, entertainment, sexual shenanigans, crime, sports and disaster stories (Bird, 1992: 8, 12). In Sparks' words, a tabloid is:

...a form marked by two major features: it devotes relatively little attention to politics, economics, and society and relatively much attention to ... sports, scandal, and popular entertainment; it devotes much attention to the personal and private lives of people, both celebrities and ordinary people, and relatively little to political processes, economic developments, and social changes. (2000: 10)

It is in the above context that the tabloid press is criticised for sensationalism and emotionalism, oversimplification of complex issues, and for catering to the lowest common denominator - and sometimes for lying (Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004: 287). Certainly, the diverse meanings attached to the term are indicative of much

conceptual confusion. The term is often used interchangeably with ‘popular’ and sometimes in a derogatory sense (Sparks, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Dahlgren, 1992). Due to the inconclusive nature of the debates about tabloids, it is important to examine the key theoretical positions and concepts used in the academic literature on the subject. As highlighted earlier on the notion of the public sphere, important in the discussion are the assumptions about the roles of tabloid journalism in public life.

The main criticism on tabloidisation views the concept as referring to the narrowing of the range of public affairs information available in the mainstream media. The criticism is based on the perceived effects of the tabloid style itself, and the way that traditional news about political and social issues is treated in tabloid media. From this perspective, public affairs coverage in the tabloids ‘tends to simplify, personalise, and dramatise material in ways that seriously obscure its public information content’ (Sparks, 1992: 44). Consequently, the news media have since been seen as being especially prone to what Franklin termed “newszak”¹ (Franklin, 1997:5).

In the post-apartheid South Africa, tabloids are subjected to the same criticism. Much of the criticism is based on moral grounds, that is, the tabloids’ sensational approach, lack of respect for privacy as well as their lewd content (Wasserman, 2008:3). Despite enjoying an unparalleled popularity, South African tabloids have been blamed for undermining the country’s new democratic human rights culture by their depictions of crime victims and sexual content, as well as for lack of constructive coverage of formal politics that could add to the expansion of the hatchling democracy (Wasserman, 2008:7).

Another criticism of tabloid journalism from this perspective is that its focus on celebrity, scandal, and sex draws audiences’ attention away from potentially more

¹ Franklin appropriates Malcolm Muggeridge’s neologism ‘Newszak’ (news converted into entertainment) to describe news as a product designed and processed for a particular market and delivered in homogenous ‘snippets’ (1997: 5).

'important' social issues. Such an approach is well illustrated by Franklin (1997), who perceives tabloids' negative influence on society:

Entertainment has superseded the provision of information, human interest has supplanted the public interest, measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism, the trivial has triumphed over the weighty, the intimate relations of celebrities from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal families are judged more "newsworthy" than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. (1997: 4)

Thus, by effectively depoliticising their readers to the role of consumers, they have inhibited their identity as citizens. This implies that tabloid newspapers, in replacing reason with emotion and analysis with sensation, reduce citizens' analytical comprehension of the world, and thus their potential to contribute to it. Consequently, as only the 'mainstream' media are seen as encouraging rational thinking, the 'masses' are denied the opportunity to think rationally because they rely on tabloid journalism (Sparks, 1992: 44). From this viewpoint, tabloids are often regarded as constituting a "crisis for democracy" due to their focus on what is seen as diversions: that is, sports, scandal and entertainment, rather than what is perceived to be serious issues pertaining to the well-being of democratic society: like politics, economics and social issues (Sparks, 2000: 10).

Despite the negative interpretations of tabloid journalism among those concerned with the media's role in maintaining public sphere discourse, some counter-arguments provide more nuanced interpretations in this regard. Cultural studies scholars have argued that tabloids communicate the 'politics of the everyday' for those readers for whom formal politics are often far removed from their lived experience (Wasserman, 2008: 2). Contrasting the fact that tabloid journalism is criticised as populist and simplifying, defendants have pointed out that tabloids contribute to a democratic public sphere by undermining the social hierarchy which allows the elite to dominate mediated debate (Fiske, 1989: 103). Tabloids present an alternative view of reality that is not found in official, "quality" news. Through sensation and excess, popular texts like tabloids question the dominant social standards and point to the "excessive failure of the normal" (Fiske, 1989: 116). Thus, the existence of tabloids should be

read as an index of the “extent of dissatisfaction in a society, particularly among those who feel powerless to change their situation” (Fiske, 1989: 117). In that view, tabloids can be read as containing a political message, even though not in the form associated with the rational public sphere of official media (Wasserman, 2008:5).

Moreover, as ‘ritual forms of communication’, tabloids “reproduce and instil a sense of community and identity, of shared conditions, values, understandings and so on” (Gripsrud, 2000:285, 295). Therefore, tabloid journalism can be seen as providing the audience with existential and moral help, and support in the daily struggles to cope with an everyday life marked by the uncertainties characteristic of modernity:

Democracy as a social form includes cultural life: various forms of reflection on existential matters or “the human condition”: the formation, maintenance, deconstruction, and reformation of identities... (Gripsrud, 2000: 297).

From this viewpoint, the tabloids’ melodramatic approach to news provides a ‘bottom-up’ perspective on daily life that assists audiences make sense of a world that often seems to challenge the distance of rational explanations or dominant value frameworks (Gripsrud, 2000: 297). This is particularly the case in present day media-saturated societies, where ‘(p)opular culture is becoming ever more important to political communication and political understanding’ (Van Zoonen, 2000: 6).

From the discussion on tabloids so far, what becomes important when reviewing the academic dispute concerning tabloid journalism’s relation to society, is that it stretches from one polar end, where it is regarded as the disintegration of an enlightened, free and democratic society, to another, where tabloid media are praised as both liberating and inclusive, as encouraging skepticism and rebellion against authoritarian systems (Johansson, 2007: 28). A key aspect of this debate is the firm division of arguments according to two intellectual traditions of political economy and cultural studies, within the broader field of media studies. While some critics tend to apply a critical framework of political economy (for example, Franklin), others like

Fiske and Hartley use a cultural studies approach, which acknowledges the complexity of popular culture and popular media texts (see Johansson, 2007).

It has been argued that the critics in the political economy tradition have worked with what could be regarded as a rather crude view that tabloid journalism is responsible for the disintegration of society, which has given cultural studies scholars reason to focus on disputing such critiques (Turner, 1999: 60). In an effort to strike a more balanced dialogue between these two positions, Turner reiterates that at least one aspect of tabloidisation – the specific performance of that which describes itself as ‘journalism’ – demands more scrutiny than it currently gets (Turner, 1999: 60). At this point, an approach can be suggested which takes onboard some of the critical concerns regarding tabloidisation, while at the same time recognising the complexities of popular media texts. This approach would be more sensitive to different kinds of tabloids. For example, a tabloid newspaper like the *Sowetan* may need a different kind of analysis from the *Daily Sun*.

While debates about the relationship between tabloid journalism and society are vital to theories about the role of the media in a democracy, the focus on the informational aspects of tabloid journalism has not given a complete understanding of its appeal, and at the same time has done little to explain its popularity and uses (Johansson, 2007: 44). It therefore seems worthwhile to consider that journalism serves purposes that surpass merely conveying information about public issues. This is more important than simply assuming that journalism is ‘primarily about the transmission of information which can be used by the citizenry to accumulate knowledge and engage in responsible judgements’ (Langer, 1998: 5 cited in Johansson, 2007: 44). To address this lack (which Langer calls ‘the lament’), some scholars (see Langer, 1998; Johansson, 2007) have analysed what tabloid critics have portrayed as the insignificant, trashy side of news. Instead of regarding news as exclusively a way to convey information, their approaches consider tabloid journalism as a ‘cultural discourse’. The approach assumes that people’s connection with the news may be more ritualistic, symbolic, and possibly mythic, rather than informational. In light of

these arguments they suggest that news might better be conceptualised as a ‘form of cultural discourse’ that shape and are shaped by society (Langer, 1998: 5).

In other words, it means that tabloid journalism can be analysed as a component of our culture, rather than as an isolated social or journalistic phenomenon. Rather than taking stories about stars and celebrities as trivial in relation to the more socially ‘weighty’ news stories, such material could be seen as enabling discussions about privilege, where it is presented as questionable and the privileged scrutinised according to an imposed morality (see Connell, 1991; 1992). Drawing on Fiske’s (1992) insights, it can be argued that criticism that assumes tabloid journalism not only stands apart from political processes, but also cultivates an alienated passivity in audiences, fails to take into account the genre-specific nature of tabloid content, in which political concerns are expressed differently from official discourses.

Conclusion

Tabloid journalism is central to debates about media standards, and has been criticised for spearheading a development towards a ‘tabloidised’ media environment. A common argument is that tabloid journalism operates against democratic communication, by severing its audiences from an understanding of the social and political structures governing their lives. On the other hand, it has been seen as an inclusive and democratic form of communication, as well as an outlet for a subversive form of ‘resistance’ against dominating power structures. Also noted in the chapter are the debates about whether or not tabloids contribute to the notion of the public sphere. As noted above, tabloids, as a part of popular culture, have forced scholars to redefine our understanding of the public sphere. Nonetheless, what is certain is that they (tabloids), probably more than any other media, play a significant role in the daily lives of their readers.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 is an overview of the research, reviewing the goals as well as the significance of the research. Chapter 2 discusses reception theory on which the research is based. Chapter 3 discusses the research methods followed in order to fulfil the objectives of the study. Chapters 4 to 6 discuss data analysis and findings. And finally, Chapter 7 summarises and concludes the research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In chapter 1, I noted that the purpose of this research is to identify the reasons why people are attracted to the *Daily Sun*. This chapter will review reception theory which will form the framework for my study. I review the main research traditions that have explored the nexus between the media and their audiences.

The History of Media Reception

Numerous debates have taken place in the academic field as to whether audiences of popular culture are passive or active participants in their media consumption (Thompson, 1988: 375). The approaches to the relationship between the media and the audiences can be summarised as having a concern with “effects, uses and gratifications, cultural studies and reception analysis which stretches into the latest ethnographic research strand” (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 207). What differentiates these approaches is the degree to which the balance of power and influence is attributed to the media, both in terms of production and content, or to the audience as receivers of that content (O’Sullivan et al, 1994: 150). Another way of differentiating these competing approaches is to distinguish between those that stress the determining power of the media, as well as those that highlight the “interpretive freedom” of the audience (Strelitz, 2000: 38).

The tradition of effects studies represents the first stance, mobilising a ‘hypodermic’ model of media influence. From this perspective, the media have the power to ‘inject’ ideologies into their audiences, resulting in them behaving in particular ways. The model however “simplistically describes communication as transmitting a message from sender to receiver” (Waisbord, 2001: 4). In other words, this simple stimulus-

response approach imagines the media as a kind of narcotic and the relationship between the media and audiences as one where the audiences just accept the attitudes, opinions and beliefs expressed by the media without question (Bennett, 1982: 30-55). In view of this, the discussion of media effects linked with the mass society approach implies that people exist only as receptacles for media messages, as passive groups whose behaviours and attitudes are the result of a powerful external force-the media. The implied assumption therefore is that to understand the media's effects on people, one needs to know what the message says.

However, the media do not have such direct effects on the audiences they serve. Rather, the media have a reasonably weak influence in shaping individual beliefs, opinions and attitudes (Fiske, 1992: 262). Thus, the effects model is an inadequate depiction of the relationship between media and the audience, as it does not account for the audiences' diverse beliefs, opinions, ideals and attitudes. As Abercrombie argues:

Audiences are not blank sheets of paper on which media messages can be written, members of an audience will have prior attitudes and beliefs which will determine how effective media messages are. (1996:140)

In addition, the effects theory does not accurately reflect the plurastic nature of society. Critics of the theory argue that the theory takes too far the thesis that all intermediary social structures between media and the masses have broken down (Fiske, 1987:262). By focusing on the 'effects' of the media, this perspective largely stripped members of the audience of any human agency, making it "sociologically naïve" (Brooke and Jerymn, 2003: 7). The media of course, have social effects, which are neither all-powerful nor too direct. This has led the effects model to be disregarded in view of the audiences' response to the media.

As a result of evidence from research that refuted the claims of the effects tradition, attention began to turn from the question of what the media do to audiences, to what audiences do with the media (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Gerbner, 1990 and Morley,

1992). These approaches include the uses and gratification approach, cultural studies, as well as reception analysis (Morley, 1992: 45-49).

The uses and gratification theory takes a more humanistic approach to looking at media use. It is grounded in individual, psychological meanings rather than social ones (Seiter *et al.*, 1989: 2; Silverstone, 1990:177). Research conducted in this field questioned the patterns of media exposure, and what gratifications people derive from the media. In this model, audiences are active, as opposed to passive, as implied in the effects model (Katz et al, 1973: 168). They have specific needs and so they actively turn to media texts to gratify them. In this view, the main reasons why people use different media include the need for surveillance, diversion or escapism, information and entertainment (Katz et al, 1973: 168).

The model acknowledges that audiences have a choice of texts from which to select, and which suit their needs. These needs generate certain expectations about the mass media, leading to different patterns of media exposure, which in turn result in both the gratification of needs and in unintended audience responses (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 210). An important advance developed by the uses and gratifications perspective was that of the variability of responses to, and interpretations of, media texts by audiences. This led to a departure from talking about the 'effects' of texts on a homogenous mass audience who are all expected to be affected and respond in the same way. In this way, the theory opens up the question of different interpretations. As Ang argues,

From this perspective, the use of media is a highly selective and motivated activity, and not just a mindless pastime. In general, people use the media because they expect that doing so will give them some gratifications- hence the name of this research tradition. These gratifications are assumed to be related to the satisfaction of social and psychological needs experienced by the individual. (1990: 159)

The theory highlights the important fact that different members of the mass media audience may use and interpret media texts in different ways from what the communicator intended, or in different ways from other audience members (Morley,

1992: 50-51). The theory is thus significant because of its capacity to look at the active engagement of the audience with the media. The active viewer is a notion central to cultural studies. Thus, "A focus on practices of consumption... helps us to understand that meanings are... made in usage" (Du Gay and Hall, 1997: 85).

Nevertheless, there is a danger in pursuing the active audience too far. In fact, the audience is granted an imperial control over the products of mass culture, relatively unconstrained by text, ideology, or social structure (Fiske, 1987: 265). Also, while acknowledging the audience as active, the model still implies that messages are packages of information that all the audiences read in the same way (O'Sullivan et al, 1994: 131). By concentrating on individual psychological and personality factors, the approach romanticises audience freedom, tending to ignore issues of ideology, and the situational and socio-cultural determinants of media use: the tendency is to concentrate solely on why audiences consume the media, rather than extending the investigation to discover what meanings and interpretations are produced and in what circumstances (O'Sullivan et al, 1994: 131). This is compounded by the fact that the approach does not give attention to the content of media output, that is, researchers in this approach attempt to find out why people use media while not analysing exactly what people get out of a television show, a newspaper or a pop song. Thus, what is overlooked are the meanings that people give to media culture (Ang, 1990: 160).

Like the effects tradition, the uses and gratifications model ignores the audiences and their social backgrounds, how they form their interpretations of the media messages and their specific relationship with the media text (Morley, 1989: 16). The model simply implies that audiences comprise individuals whose conscious search for gratifications elicits a media response, which eventually supplies their needs. This laissez-faire market concept overlooks the extent to which audience needs are partly a product of media supply and the social context from which the audiences originate—for example, class and ethnic subcultures (O'Sullivan et al, 1994: 157). The above arguments highlight the need to discuss media reception in relation to Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model.

Encoding-Decoding model and Reception Theory

Hall's seminal article on encoding and decoding model (1980) is commonly recognised as having set the critical theoretical framework that has informed most subsequent audience reception studies (Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 128). The model is an attempt to take forward insights which had emerged from the effects and uses and gratifications perspectives. From the effects theories, the encoding/decoding model derives the notion that mass communication is a structured activity, in which media production institutions have power to set agendas (Hall, 1980: 131). In the model, Hall argues that communication entails the transformation of an historical event into a story as part of the communicative event. He points out that the (transmission) model of communication had been conceived of as a circle, but that it was also possible to think of it as a series of articulated, linked moments: production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction (1980: 128).

In this view, producers of media texts encode meaning into texts through the practices of production. Audiences, upon receiving the texts, decode them based on a range of cultural contexts. In other words, the diverse audiences do not interpret messages 'as sent' or 'as expressed', and moreover, messages are not simply 'transmitted', but meanings are produced: first by the encoder from the 'raw' material of everyday life, second, by the audience in relation to its location in other discourses (Hall, et al, 1980: 130). For that reason, media texts pass through multiple stages (i.e., 'distinctive moments') of transformation from origins to its reception and interpretation.

In the first stage, the 'meaningful discourse' is encoded or 'framed', based upon the meaning structure of the mass media production organisation and its main supports (Hall, et al, 1980: 129-130). At the point of 'encoding', many ways of looking at the world are 'in dominance'. However, media institutions' frameworks of meaning are likely to favour the dominant power structures. In Hall's words:

The moment of media production is framed throughout by meanings and ideas, knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically

defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience. (1980:133)

Secondly, as the meanings and messages are in the form of 'meaningful discourse', the formal rules of language and discourse are 'in dominance'. Finally, the meaningful discourse is consequently decoded. The process occurs in relation to the different meaning structures and frameworks of knowledge of differently positioned audiences (Hall et al, 1980:130). Thus, moments of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly balanced, and decoding can take a 'different turn' than that intended by the encoder (1980:131). This means that the meaning as decoded by an audience member may not necessarily correspond with the meaning of the text as encoded, despite shared language. In this case, audience members can assume different meanings. Media texts are thus located between their producers and the audiences who decode them in a manner that may be related to specific social, economic and cultural situations (Hall, 1980:131).

Hall suggests different 'ideal-type' positions from which decoding can be made. Firstly, in the dominant-hegemonic position, the audiences decode the medium according to the preferred meaning of the producer (Hall et al, 1980:136). This means that the audience members assume the dominant hegemonic position when they identify with and adopt the preferred meaning offered by the text. The negotiated position is established when audience members oppose the preferred meaning. (Hall et al, 1980:137). Finally, an oppositional reading can be made by audiences who recognise the preferred reading, but can 'read between the lines' of official versions of events and so choose to decode within an alternative frame of reference. In other words, the oppositional position is established when the audience members understand the preferred meaning, but disagree with it. (Hall et al, 1980:137).

Critique of the Encoding/Decoding model

The basis of the encoding/decoding model includes the fact that the same event can be encoded in many ways, apart from containing more than one potential 'reading'. The point is that texts suggest and 'prefer' certain readings over others, and they can never be closed around one reading, hence their polysemic nature. Hall's approach thus signals a shift from one paradigm of understanding text-audience relationship to another, and unlike the previous behavioural paradigm, it questions issues of how ideology works (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998: 10).

The model also locates the site of a text's meaning closer to the reader than the text itself (Fiske, 1987a: 64). There have been some differences of opinion about the interpretation: some perceive the model as romanticising the notion of the active reader, while others concede that the notion of the 'preferred reading', is problematic, but argue that it is preferable to a conception of the media text as open to any interpretation (Curran 1990; Morley, 1992c: 282). Furthermore, the model realises that the meaning made by the audience is shaped by various factors including the socio-economic frameworks and past experiences. In addition to these frameworks, the meaning also involves the context in which the media text is consumed. Thus, the producer, the text and the audience as well as the connections among them, are imperative in the process of media communication (Abercrombie, 1996:141).

The emphasis on audience in the encoding/decoding model is also valuable. As indicated in the discussion, the meaning is not in the text, but in the "*reading*" (Hart, 1991: 65). Empowering the audiences in this way indicates that the media are not as manipulative as the effect theories imply (Hart, 1991: 65). Ultimately, it is the audiences that derive preferred meanings from media texts. The implication therefore is that the audiences, regardless of the medium, have not been historically passive or inconsequential in shaping its participation in, or the content of, popular media. (Hart, 1991: 65).

But, there are some limitations to the encoding/decoding model of audience reception. Morley, for example, points to the following problems:

... the extent to which the model tries to conceive of language merely as a conveyor belt for preconstituted meanings or messages, the way in which it tends to confuse textual meaning with the conscious intentions of broadcasters, and the tendency to blur together under the heading of “decoding” what are probably best thought of as separate processes along the axes of comprehension/incomprehension, as opposed to agreement/disagreement with the propositional content of messages. (1989: 18)

The concept of the ‘preferred meaning’, which is central to the model, is open to criticisms. In Morley’s view, it is simpler to identify in factual texts, such as newspaper reports, television news and documentaries than in fiction-based texts, where there are more likely to be diverse readings of the preferred texts (1989: 19). In addition, it is unclear whether the preferred meanings are embedded in the text, or whether it is something agreed on by the majority of the audience. By considering the audience in the interpretation of the media text, it is therefore clear that the process of media communication is not clear-cut. Hence, meaning is considered to be what the audiences make of the text, taking away most of the power of the producer and the text (Morley, 1989: 20).

Furthermore, the model overlooks a conceptualisation of the audience. There are many ways to conceptualise the audience and the ways in which they work with the media (Morley, 1992:53), yet there is a tendency to think of audiences as ‘masses’. Morley demonstrates how an audience cannot be regarded as an ‘atomised mass of individuals’, but as a number of sub-cultural formations or groupings of ‘members’ who will, as members of those groups, share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages in a particular way (Morley, 1992: 54). According to Morley, interpretations of media messages are always shaped within social structures and sub-groupings. This means that its reception must be conceptualised as part of wider social discourses.

Moreover, the emphasis on the polysemic nature of the text and on the activity of the audience within the model has been taken too far. In his discussion of television culture, Fiske argues for a distinction between the financial and cultural economies, thus ascribing consumer power mainly to those involved in the latter (1987a: 260). It is in the selection and 'reading' that consumers exert their power, so that the producers of those commodities cannot be certain of success. For this reason, the extent of media power has been lost sight of, as if the 'text' has been theoretically 'dissolved' into the audience's supposedly multiple 'readings' of it (Fiske, 1987: 68).

As Hall's three categories of reading were considered too simplistic (see Fiske, 1987a), Morley developed a model derived from discourse theory (Fiske, 1987a: 268). Discourse is defined as a socially located way of making sense of an important area of social experience (1987a: 268). Media texts are seen as discourses, and the readers' views or understandings are similarly constituted of discourses through which they make sense of their social experiences. Consequently, the reading of a text becomes that moment when the discourses of the reader meet with those of the text (Morley, 1989:22). The reading process then becomes a negotiation between the social sense inscribed in the text and the meanings of social experience made by the diverse audiences (Fiske, 1987a: 269).

Even though Hall's encoding/decoding model pointed to the importance of interpretation and social discourses around the media, it was later regarded as too schematic and focused on the determinate moment of 'decoding', with less consideration of the functions of the medium itself as well as the contexts of reception, such as the role of the family in television viewing (Fiske, 1987a; Ang, 1985; Morley, 1989). But regardless of its weaknesses, it became a departure point for a new breed of studies that explored the interpretative side of reception. Hall's theory helps bring to light several aspects of communication that previous theories ignored. These aspects include the multiplicity of meanings of media content, the varied 'interpretive communities', and the primacy of the audience in determining meaning.

The weaknesses of the theories discussed so far led to the need by researchers to focus on the interplay between texts and context in the production of meaning (Ang, 1990: 240). This perspective introduced qualitative interview research methods that examined what people read in the media and how they interpret texts (Jensen, 1988). Thus, the interplay between texts and audiences shifted focus to audiences, and viewed the media as less influential (Moore, 1993: 6). This shift led to the development of a strand that is generally referred to as reception analysis, which ushered in what Curran terms “a reconceptualisation of the audience as an active producer of meaning” (2002: 115).

Reception analysis has been defined as “the study of audience interpretations and uses of media texts and technologies” (Ang, 1990: 242). The process emphasises the negotiation of meaning between texts and readers situated within specific socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1986; Moore, 1986; Ang, 1996). The key assumption in reception is that meaning-making is a complex process: meanings of texts are never merely transferred from the media to their audiences, meanings of media texts are not fixed, or inherent within the texts (Schroder *et al.*, 2003; Ang, 1990: 160; O’Sullivan *et al.*, 1994: 84). Instead, meanings are generated as a result of a negotiation between the texts and discourses of the socially located readers (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1989; Moore, 1993). Thus, Jensen notes that:

Reception is a relatively open activity of making sense, so that audiences reformulate or perhaps, oppose what is arguably the dominant meaning of the media text. Drawing on their own categories of experience, the recipients may establish links between media discourses and everyday discourses from politics and culture, which are rather unexpected and which move beyond the universes ‘imminent’ in the text. (1988: 4).

However, this does not mean that the reader’s social position mechanically produces meanings in a way that would parallel the functionalist way that texts are understood to work in the effects tradition. Rather, it means that the context of media production and reception sets the limit and boundaries of interpretation (see Morley, 1989; Hall, 1980). These boundaries can be based on class, socio-cultural, socio-historical, and socio-economic practices, to mention a few (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1989; Moore,

1993). Thus, reception becomes a situated activity which enables individuals to take some distance from the real contexts of their daily lives (Thompson, 1995:39).

Building on cultural studies, reception analysis views the media texts as a set of culturally and generically coded discourses, and sees audiences as agents of meaning production who formulate their own meanings of the text (Jensen, 1988: 4). Strelitz takes a similar position, noting that a theme that runs through his study is that consumption of particular cultural forms and the meanings that are made "takes place within particular socio-political contexts" (2002: 460). His study (2002) explored how South African youths responded to global media texts that are distributed locally. The results of the study indicated that the participants' lived realities influenced their negotiation of media messages. Thus in reception, the readers' interpretations diverge depending on the symbolic resources they draw from their socio-economic position, gender and ethnicity. However, there is a potential for critical or oppositional readings that are expected, enabled and restricted by the degree of closure semiotically encoded into the text (Livingstone, 2004: 79; Ang 1996: 70). In short, "meanings for audiences cannot be decided upon outside of the multidimensional intersubjective networks in which the object is inserted and made to mean in concrete contextual settings" (Ang, 1996: 70).

It is in this regard that Ang refers to the ways in which people "encounter, use, interpret, enjoy, think and talk about television and other media in everyday life" as being 'context-bound', and thus demands a sense of 'radical contextualism'(1996: 70). This means that researchers need to let go of predetermined ideas such as perceiving the media, and in this case, tabloids, as an entertainment medium, and rather appreciate that the meanings only emerge within contextualised audience practices (Ang, 1996: 70).

The culturalist perspective adopted by reception is a vital one concerned with investigating audience diversity in reception (Moore, 1993). The perspective is linked with the sociological view which also assumes that audiences are constituted

socially, economically and culturally, and should be studied within specific contexts (Alasuutari, 1999; Ang, 1996). It also affirms that audiences' reception is framed within the broader discourses of specific audience situations. Another aspect of the sociological approach to audience reception reiterates the uses that audiences make of the prevailing concerns in their world. These include the viewpoints and subject positions taken in relation to media texts, how and by whom they are discussed in public, and how people interpret them in their everyday life (Lull, 1990; Alasuutari, 1999). In other words, the perspective is concerned with the examination of the relationship among three dimensions of the communicative event: the text, discourse practice and the socio-cultural practice (Lull, 1990; Alasuutari, 1999).

From a cultural studies perspective, social interaction within and outside the media consumption context can produce meaning. For example, Katz and Liebes' study (1984) of audiences of *Dallas*, found that during and after the programme, people discussed what they had seen and came to collective understandings. The viewers of this programme perceived, interpreted and evaluated the programme in terms of their local cultures and personal experiences (Katz and Liebes, 1984: 24). Thus, conversations with significant others help audiences to select frames for interpreting the text and possibly, incorporating it into their lives (Katz and Liebes, 1984: 188). In my study, the point of analysis may also include investigating whether or not *Daily Sun* readers discuss the stories they read.

Conclusion

This chapter examined some seminal works pertaining to my research. I discussed the history of media reception, focusing on the text-audience relationship in the effects and the uses and gratifications approaches, as well as the reception theory. I also discussed Hall's theory of the encoding/decoding model and the concept of the active audience, noting that these are important influences on reception analysis. As evidenced in the discussion, a vital concept within the study of audiences continues to be 'influence'. Conceptions of media influence have shifted from concepts of influence as part of direct 'effects', to a more nuanced understanding of the

interaction between media audiences and texts, in which the active participation and interpretive abilities of audience members are stressed.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological approach to the analysis of the *Daily Sun*'s attraction to large numbers of newspaper readers. First I provide a rationale of the qualitative approach adopted. Then, I discuss the steps that led to the analysis of the research questions, and I present detailed descriptions and explanations of the methods of analysis, which include focus group as well as in-depth individual interviews.

Reception Analysis Methodology

My study is grounded in reception analysis which is predicated upon a qualitative approach to research, as qualitative methods of data collection are most often associated with reception analysis (Jensen, 1986: 4). Reception analysis, as a research methodology, is the study of the social production of meaning (Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 147). The approach focuses on examining what people see in the media and on the meanings they produce when they interpret media texts (see Ang, 1985). It combines a qualitative approach to media as texts- their production and circulation of meaning in society- with an interest in their recipients as co-producers of meaning. Its focus of analysis is on specific content, and the complex signifying process of the negotiation between texts and readers situated within specific social contexts (Ang 1985; Schroder *et al.*, 2003).

To investigate the process of reception, the analysis depends on empirical data about the media product as well as its decodings (Jensen, 1988: 3-5). For that reason, reception analysis explores people's media experiences through the medium of extended talk (Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 147). It further seeks to shed light on audience's practices and experiences, through "getting those involved to verbalise them in a non-

natural but open situation of the qualitative research interview, in which informants have considerable power to influence the agenda” (Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 147).

Qualitative Research: Philosophical Underpinnings

Before engaging in research, it is important to explore previous work carried out on the subject (Newell, 1993: 98). My inquiry revealed that authors like Morley (1980, 1986) and Liebes and Katz (1993) had effectively used small groups and qualitative interviews to ascertain people’s attitudes to media usage. Their methods of research seemed appropriate to my study. Qualitative research methods seemed more likely to facilitate constructive insights for ascertaining the way in which audiences engage with, talk about, and construct meaning from the media they engage with (Deacon, *et al.*, 1999: 7). Moreover, these qualitative research methods allow for an in-depth study of social phenomena reliant on interpretation and contextualisation.

Interpretive science is the origin of qualitative research methods, hence the name “the interpretive tradition” (Deacon, 1999: 6). From this perspective, meanings emerge from social actors. Thus, one kind of knowledge that qualitative researchers seek is the realisation of human beings’ lived experience (Lindlof, 1995: 4). It is a flexible form of research which calls for personal and involved inquiry in order to analyse human behaviour and make sense of human understanding (1995: 5). Another important attribute of qualitative research is that it recognises the way that people “understand and interpret their social realities” (Bryman, 1988: 8). Unlike positivism, which holds that ‘reality’ is a fixed external truth, qualitative research insists that people create and reconstruct social realities through everyday social practices and the conceptual categories underpinning them (Deacon, 1999: 7). It emphasises the understanding and descriptions of individuals’ subjective meanings, assuming that human subjectivity is always shifting, thus rendering quantitative methods inappropriate for research on attitudes (Grinnell, 1985: 264).

The decision to use qualitative research methods relates to wider philosophical aspects of methodology. The theoretical underpinnings of a qualitative methodology are typically attributed to phenomenology (Deacon et al., 1999: 5). Qualitative research takes the actor's perspective as the starting point, and in so doing, highlights that in studying audiences, we are examining a creative process in which audiences produce and maintain forms of life and society, and systems of meaning and value. This creative activity is founded on the ability to build cultural forms from symbols that express the will to live and assert meaning. Thus we do not ask "how do the media affect us", but "what are the interpretations of meaning and value created in the media and what is their relation to the rest of life?" (Christians & Carey, 1989: 358-9).

An important aspect of the qualitative approach includes the analysis of 'audience data' and 'content data' that employ hermeneutic textual analysis, unstructured or semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, discourse and qualitative content analysis techniques. As these techniques enable the collection of ideographic data about a community, qualitative research generates information about a situation as it is lived by the people in their community (Bryman, 1988: 79). The goal of qualitative research is also to access the 'insider' perspective characteristic of members of a culture (or subculture), to understand the way people think and make meaning within their social context, and how they express these understandings through communication. This means that the method does not aim to establish relations of cause and effect (Priest, 1996: 103). As observed by Bryman, "the *sine qua non* is a commitment to seeing the social world from the point of view of the actor – one's subjects" (1988: 77). This means that instead of aiming for objectivity, as in quantitative research, qualitative research is committed to viewing events, norms, and values from the perspective of the people being studied (Bryman, 1988: 61). The methods therefore enable a holistic investigation of the interpretation of meaning because it pursues the in-depth understanding of those being investigated (Wimmer & Dominic, 1991: 139).

It is the above strengths of the qualitative method and its associated techniques that I find particularly suited to this study, which aims to understand both the lived realities of the readers of the *Daily Sun*, and the ways in which these intersect with a particular aspect of their media consumption. To achieve the objectives of the research, the study adopts a three-stage design: preliminary qualitative content analysis, focus group and individual interviews. These methods enable me to examine the process of reception and gain insights into the appeal of the *Daily Sun* amongst its Grahamstown readers, how they interact with and speak about the texts, and how these encounters both shape and are shaped by their lived experiences.

The location of the study and the sampling procedure

The purpose of sampling is to select the research participants as well as the texts to be analysed. I employed purposive sampling, drawing participants from ‘naturally’ existing communities, using the snowball sampling method (Hansen *et al.*, 1998: 265). Following purposive sampling guidelines, the participants were drawn from members of the Grahamstown community. Grahamstown is a city in the Eastern Cape Province of the Republic of South Africa. It is the seat of the Makana municipality, with a population of 41,799, of which 77.4% is black, 11.8% Coloured, 10% white, and 0.7% Asian (Makana Municipality, 2003). As mentioned in the first chapter, I chose this community because I live in Grahamstown and have established that many of the readers of the *Daily Sun* use its content as a basis for their everyday talk.

Given that the readership of the *Daily Sun* cuts across all age groups, the participants were selected in such a way that they represent differences in social class, marital status, economic disposition, and education variables as highlighted below. The readers who participated were regular male and female readers from social categories which included secretaries, taxi drivers, shop assistants, domestic cleaners, as well as the self-employed. The participating readers were aged 18-40. I chose this category because they represent a large section of the paper’s readership (see appendix 1 for the demographic profile of *Daily Sun* readers). Alongside this category, I also invited two women who were above this age group. These two elders were not employed but

they survive on the old age social grant. One of them was my landlady at the time of study, and the other one was her friend. They took turns purchasing and reading the *Daily Sun*. Thus, the sample was framed to be indicative of important reader groups. All in all, 21 readers (11 males and 10 females) participated in four focus groups (see page 36). The student focus group consisted of three males and three females. Two of them had completed an undergraduate degree, while the other four were still undergraduates. One of them is also married. The other focus groups comprised five and four men and women respectively. I did not ask about their marital status but during introductions, some of them indicated that they were married and have children, others highlighted that they were single but they also have children. The last group was of mixed gender, with three men and three women. Except for the group of students who stay in the university residences and in town, the rest of the participants reside in the township of Joza, which is located on the outskirts of the colonial city of Grahamstown. Like most of the townships in South Africa, Joza is a mix of ramshackle corrugated iron shacks, rows of the neat RDP² houses provided by the government as part of its re-housing efforts, larger older houses and a few flashy modern mansions - all of them set amid unfenced grasslands where cattle wander and rubbish accumulates in heaps.

Since interviews must define a narrow audience for study, sampling and recruitment of the groups is critical. This means that individuals invited to participate in the discussions should be able and willing to provide the required information and be representative of the population (Hansen et al, 1998: 264). Also, the choice of participants is influenced by criteria that are appropriate for the specific study and the number of participants is also situational (Ruddock, 2001: 133). Participants were thus purposively selected using convenience and snowball sampling, placing particular focus on their residence in Grahamstown, shared cultural characteristics and their symbolic connection in the regular reading of the *Daily Sun*. The participants were selected non-randomly since they possess the particular common characteristics

² Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is a South African socio-economic policy framework implemented by the African National Congress (ANC) government of Nelson Mandela in 1994. The framework was developed and implemented in order to address the massive shortfalls in social services such as housing, clean water, electrification and health care.

mentioned above. This sample is however not representative of the general population but, as has been noted, “Having representative samples in qualitative research may be neither necessary nor desirable because the object of the study is simply to test a particular hypothesis” which in the case of this study, is the active audience theory (Hansen et al., 1998: 242).

The recruitment method described above made it easier to get access to pre-existing groups, such as groups of friends or work colleagues, and this was favoured instead of the common use of groups not already acquainted, which is sometimes considered advantageous in that members are not inhibited by existing social hierarchies (Hansen et al., 1998: 242). I also felt that pre-existing groups were more suited to a study investigating the everyday life context of the reading, since these ‘are, after all, the networks in which people might normally discuss or evade the sort of issues likely to be raised in the research sessions (Kitzinger & Barber, 1999: 8).

The main methods of data selection were a combination of focus groups and individual interviews with readers of the *Daily Sun*. However, as I was interested in the way that the sense-making process of reading is shaped through the communicative strategies of this newspaper, I first did a visual and textual analysis which explores aspects of the style and content of the paper in order to provide a backdrop for the reception research. The study was therefore a two-part project, of which the readership research is the main part and a smaller part entails attention to the newspaper itself.

Preliminary Qualitative content analysis

Content analysis is defined as a technique used for gathering and analysing the content of texts. Content refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes or any message that can be communicated (see Deacon et al., 1999). Qualitative content analysis then adopts a critical and interpretative approach, which involves exploring the meanings that are embedded in the representations, as opposed to

looking at the frequency of particular themes as a reflection of particular phenomena, which is characteristic of quantitative content analysis. The process allows the reader to probe into and discover content in a different way from the ordinary way of reading a book or watching a television program (Neuman, 1997: 273).

Thus, the textual and visual analysis was undertaken before the recruitment of readers as a prelude to the readership study. The main reason for doing this was so that I could examine the relationship between the encoded meanings of the texts and the ways in which they were understood and used by the readers. In addition, the process of analysing the newspaper beforehand was critical for extending my own knowledge of the texts, which was helpful both in the discussions with readers and in the formulation of interview questions. It has to be mentioned that the attention paid to the tabloid as a text also helped to intensify the awareness of the inter-play between readers and their newspaper.

The textual analysis, which I discuss in the next chapter, was considered crucial to deepen the understanding of how the reception of tabloid journalism is shaped by how it addresses its readers. Rather than providing a strict typology of ‘messages’ in the text and then looking at how these are ‘decoded’ by audience members, I chose a discursive approach to analysing the tabloid as a text, looking at the strategies and styles used by the newspaper to communicate with readers. I was particularly interested in the identity positions it offers its readers. I was also interested in how its stylistic and narrative features work to produce the basis for reading experiences, where format and style are as important as the content itself. As the analysis was meant to add to the understanding of the reading experience, I decided to integrate all of the editorial content, as it is the product as a whole that forms the foundation of the reading, rather than, for example the news content on its own. Consequently, the analysis provided a broad overview of the text, looking at the particularities of the tabloid style and format, as well as drawing on a range of elements of literary and cultural theory to identify discursive themes vital to shaping the reading experience.

To sample copies of the *Daily Sun* for inclusion in this study, I employed stratified random sampling. The sampling frame comprised a total of 21 copies of the publication collected between the period October 2007 and September 2008. During this period, I randomly selected a sampling frame of 10, which I considered enough and manageable for this study. The advantage of this sampling method is that it ensured that the sample composition is representative in relation to essential variables related to the research (Deacon et al, 1999: 48).

Since the analysis of texts is concerned with both their meanings and forms, I analysed the newspapers in terms of their particular representation and contextualisation of social practice, in terms of the particular constructions of the writer and reader identities, that is, what the stories highlight, or ignore. In so doing, I noted Morley's (1992) assertion that media texts have certain identities, which are governed by the codes and conventions they are constructed in relation to:

When analysing texts or programmes, we also have to look at the assumptions that lie behind the content. There will be assumptions made about the audience and these assumptions need to be made visible if we are to understand the implicit messages which a text may transmit over and above what is explicitly said in it. (Morley, 1992: 84).

Focus groups

Focus groups are typically defined as “bringing together a small group of people to participate in a carefully planned discussion on a defined topic” and in this case, the reception of the *Daily Sun*. As a qualitative research method, the technique gained popularity in the 1980s and became useful in understanding the differentiated meanings audiences make when watching or consuming media (Morgan, 1997: 115; Deacon *et al.*, 1999: 55). It is a useful method as “the explicit use of group interaction [to] produce[s] data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in the group” (Schroder et al, 2003: 153). While focus group interviews are “basically group interviews”, their distinguishing characteristic is the interaction

between group members (Morgan, 1997: 2), the “dynamic effects of interaction on expressed opinion” (Fielding, 1993: 137).

My decision to use the focus group discussion was mainly influenced by the realisation that the generation of meanings and interpretations of media content is ‘naturally’ a social activity and not an individual one as posited by positivist techniques (Hansen et al, 1998: 261). In addition, the decision was also informed by arguments that focus group discussions are compatible with the three key assumptions of qualitative research (Hansen *et al.*, 1998; Vaughn *et al.*, 1996). The first one is that in qualitative research, “the nature of reality is viewed as phenomenological, and multiple views of reality can exist, therefore individuals are invited to participate in a discussion where their diverse opinions and perspectives are desired” (Brotherson, 1994: 101). The implication is that a variety of perspectives and distinctive explanations may be obtained from a single data gathering session. Secondly, the interactions between the moderator and respondents and the interactions between the respondents themselves are recognised as having the potential to add depth and dimension to the knowledge gained, creating a synergistic effect (Hansen *et al.*, 1998: 275). Finally, “the nature of the truth statements is such that truth is influenced by perspective in relation to a particular context” (Vaughn *et al.*, 1996: 16).

The group interaction offered by the method enabled me to observe the social production of meaning, as participants negotiate their readings of the text in an environment in which they would ‘naturally’ generate meaning (Schroder *et al.*, 2003: 111; Hansen *et al.*, 1998: 275). This approach enables the group and the researcher to identify how the text ‘speaks to’ the audience and to revisit key issues from different angles at different stages in the interview. In light of the above arguments, it can therefore be argued that focus groups can be viewed as a public sphere where individuals discuss issues freely and openly, and in the process generate rich and believable qualitative data which is well-suited to detailed interpretive analysis (Deacon, 1999: 56).

The strengths and weaknesses of focus groups emanate from their two defining features (Morgan 1997: 13). The first defining feature is that they rely on the researcher's focus, which means plenty of data can be generated on the researcher's area – but then the interaction could be less natural than participant observation and like other research methods, the group could be open to influence by the researcher. Secondly, during the group's interaction, members will compare and comment on each other's experiences, which can provide valuable input on complex phenomena when respondents react to and build upon the responses of other group members, but with the possible drawback that the group itself could influence the nature of the data it produces (Morgan 1997: 15). Other drawbacks of the focus group include the fact that they are difficult to arrange, as the researcher needs to establish a convenient time and place to meet (Deacon et al 1999: 66). Also, less confident interviewees can be marginalised or silenced in group interviews (Deacon et al 1999: 67).

I conducted four focus group discussions, with at least four participants in each as it is argued that one should have between four to six focus groups until comments begin to repeat and little new information is generated (Hansen *et al*, 1998: 268). The discussions lasted between 45-60 minutes, depending on the participants' willingness to speak. They were semi-structured and taped, taking place where participants felt comfortable, such as the students' residences, participants' as well as the researcher's home. Prior to the discussions, I began by asking respondents whether they read newspapers and if so, which ones, noting their answers. This brief questioning functions as a sort of "pilot interview", since it serves to gather basic information about people's newspaper reading habits (Fielding 1993: 137).

I did not offer any payment, but I provided snacks during sessions to make the discussions less formal. The questions around which all interviews centred emerged partly from literature on the subject. For example, I asked about their reception of tabloid newspapers and their treatment of public affairs news. Also, drawing from the textual analysis, I probed them about the stylistic and thematic focuses of the newspaper.

In-depth interviews

In addition to the focus group discussions, three individual interviews with two female readers and one male reader took place. The individual interviews were done in a similar way to the groups, using the same interview guide, even though they required more interaction and yielded more personal data. This was necessary because focus group data should as far as possible be combined with a range of data gathered from different sources and using various research techniques, in the interest of ascertaining as complete and reliable data (Morgan, 1998: 132).

The rationale for the use of in-depth interviews in media studies is that “the best way to find out what people think about something is to ask them” (Jensen, 1982: 240). Individual in-depth interviews also have affinities with conversation and are well suited to tap social agents’ perspective on the media, since spoken language remains the primary and familiar mode of social interaction (Jensen, 1982: 240). The advantages of individual interviews are that the interviewer has more control, and each respondent has a greater chance of conveying his or her point of view than in group interviews (Morgan 1997: 10).

In terms of sampling, it has been advised that respondents be selected based on a pre-determined set of screening requirements. Participants for the individual interviews were purposively selected from those in the focus group interviews. Particular attention was given to the most articulate and enthusiastic participants. To this end, I probed the individuals in an effort to establish their understanding/reception of the *Daily Sun*, with particular interest in how they incorporate their cultural understandings and practices into the content. I also followed up on some of the critical issues that were raised during the focus group discussions.

With consent from the participants, the interviews were recorded, after which I transcribed them as the interviews will not be finished accounts of the audiences’ experience of the texts without further analysis of the data (Jensen, 1988: 4). To

ensure accuracy, all tapes were transcribed within two days of each interview session. I supplemented the transcripts with field notes of general observations about the groups which I had taken during and after the interviews. The notes were also a help when interpreting the transcripts, as they added details about the atmosphere, or about particular individuals' character traits.

Thus, the three-stage methodology designed in this study provided insights into the interaction between the social context, production, reception and interpretation of the *Daily Sun*. I gained insights into how Grahamstown readers speak about the content and how their interactions with the texts and each other impact on the meanings they take from these texts. The approach also allowed the interpretation of inferences and leads drawn from one data source and corroborating these with other sources.

My role as the moderator

In media and communication research, the researcher is often the moderator because the researcher is the one who is fully aware of the nature of the research and its objectives (Hansen *et al.*, 1998). It is for this reason that I facilitated all the focus group as well as the in-depth interviews. My role as the moderator was to stimulate and moderate the discussion, as well as to ensure that the conversations did not stray from the key research question, which is to investigate the popularity of the *Daily Sun* (Hansen *et al.*, 1998: 272; Morgan, 1988: 57). Being the moderator allowed me to have first-hand knowledge of the community under investigation. It also guaranteed that the thematic topics outlined in the literature review were covered as well as ensuring that similar issues are discussed in the different groups to facilitate later analysis (Knodel, 1993: 37).

Even though focus groups allow flexibility to participants' responses, this should not be mistaken for a free for all "unstructured chaos" (Hansen *et al.*, 1998: 273). Thus, my role was to ensure that the interviews concentrated on the subject and issues relevant to the research by drawing up an interview guide. This is mainly a menu of

the topics, issues and areas of discussion to be covered. It gives direction as to the sequence of issues to be covered, the nature and extent of prompting and probing, the nature and use of visual or verbal aids, and the points at which these should be introduced during the discussion (Hansen *et al.*, 1998). In constructing the interview guide, I followed the “funnel approach” which emphasises starting with more general questions followed by specific questions about how the reading of the *Daily Sun* influences the readers in their daily lives (see Hansen *et al.*, 1998). However, this does not mean that I rigidly followed the interview guide, instead, it allowed discussions to flow at length and for me to probe deeply when necessary (Morgan, 1998: 56). I also took care to avoid asking leading questions, and to be sensitive to the controversial aspects of tabloid reading. For example, although I was interested in possible differences in the newspapers’ appeal to men and women, I attempted to first let this unfold in questions about features such as the ‘*Sun Babe*’ and sports pages, rather than forcing responses about this in a direct question, unless these issues were brought up by the participants.

The interview setting exerts a framing influence on the nature of participants’ responses and on the group discussions as a whole (Hansen *et al.* 1998). For that reason, it is recommended that qualitative interviews be done in the home context in order to gain access to naturalised domains and their characteristics (see Morley, 1992). This may also mean that an action such as newspaper reading needs to be understood within the structure and dynamics of the domestic process of consumption of which it is a part (Morley, 1992: 173). The reason is that media consumption is inextricably embedded in a whole range of everyday practices that is itself partly constitutive of those practices (Scannell, 1988; Silverstone, 1990). The settings chosen were therefore convenient, non-bureaucratic and compatible with the nature of the topic under investigation, and one which also allowed participants to feel comfortable in (see Hansen *et al.*, 1998). With the student focus group, the discussion took place at Lillian Britten House, a women student residence. The rest of the interviews either took place at my home or at homes of the participants.

Validity and Reliability

The discussion on the choice of methods used in qualitative research would be incomplete without addressing the question of reliability and validity. Reliability has been defined as

...The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable. (Joppe, 2000: 1)

On the other hand, validity addresses whether the research explains or measures what is supposed to be measured or explained. It therefore deals with the appropriateness of the method to the research question. Validity aims to establish “how well matched is the logic of the method to the kinds of research questions asked and the kind of social explanation intended to be developed” (Mason, 1996: 147). These twin concepts have key status as criteria in the natural science and in positivist social research, but have a less self-evident position in much qualitative research. Reliability may cause difficulties in research where a lot depends on the interpretative skills of the researcher. Validity can equally be seen as problematic from an idealist viewpoint (Mason, 1996: 147).

In qualitative research though, it has been debated whether individual and group interviews with different respondents should be used in one study without nullifying that study (Morgan 1997: 12-13). It has also been noted that an interest in individual behaviour may not be served by using data from group interviews. Unfortunately, most research cannot be neatly divided into either purely individual or purely group behaviour (Morgan 1997: 12-13). Rather, “it will take more research using both techniques [individual and group interviews] to provide an answer” as to which method is preferable in which circumstances (Morgan 1997: 12-13). Perhaps therefore, it is necessary to reiterate that in qualitative research, validity is obtained through systematic collection and interpretation of data, not by generalising findings to other groups nor quantifying into an overall truth (Ruddock, 2001: 133). In other words, it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something.

Ethical Considerations

It has been observed that traditional concerns have revolved around the topics of ‘informed consent’, ‘right to privacy’ and ‘protection’ from harm (Fontana & Frey, 1994: 378). In conducting the interviews, I therefore remained mindful of these ethical issues. Prior to each interview, I explained the purpose of the study to the respondents and assured them that the data collected would be treated as confidential.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the epistemological basis of qualitative methodology, arguing that it rests on interpretivism, seeking to explore subjective understandings of lived experience. I thus chose a qualitative approach to my research as this study seeks to understand how people use, interpret, and talk about the *Daily Sun*. I also noted that this study uses reception analysis based on both focus group and individual interviews, as they enable the study of media audiences from their perspectives. Like all studies in this tradition, there is no claim to generalisation and universality since it cannot be guaranteed that a similar study would come up with the similar interpretations.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapters 4 to 6 discuss the findings of my research into the popularity of the *Daily Sun* amongst Grahamstown readers. The interpretation, analysis, and discussion are grounded in the objectives of the study, and are informed by the theoretical considerations raised in earlier chapters. The findings in these three chapters are derived from the qualitative content analysis, the focus group, and individual interviews described in Chapter 3. Due to the qualitative nature of the methodology employed, the findings are presented and discussed simultaneously in a narrative form based on some major themes highlighted in the objectives of the study.

My findings are presented in two sections. Chapter 4 examines the stylistic and the basic physical appearance of the *Daily Sun*. Drawing on cultural and literary theory, it aims to support an informed view of how this paper communicates with readers. Chapters 5 and 6 draw upon secondary sources to contextualise and analyse the interviews with participants in the study. In some cases, it is difficult to separate the results of the textual analysis from the viewpoints gained during the discussions because the concerns or themes are interlocked.

An Overview of the Qualitative Content Analysis findings

The purpose of the qualitative content analysis was to familiarise myself with the paper in order to be able to pursue the cultural research that motivates the study. The purpose was also to provide a backdrop for the in-depth interrogation of audiences through a comparative analysis of ‘audience data’ and ‘content data’ in an effort to investigate the audience’s understandings and the place of the paper in their lives. Accordingly, the textual approach was essential as it helped to establish “what constitutes ‘news’, in tabloids, their sources, their linguistic style, the textual mix they favour as well as the visual elements they use in communication with their audience” (Strelitz & Steenveld, 2005: 36). Prior to explaining these in detail, I present a

summary of the content of the *Daily Sun* in terms of the main sections of the paper and the issues covered in those sections.

Name of Section	Issues covered in the Section
<i>Sun News</i>	Local news: mainly human interest stories, stories about the ordinary people's issues. Local news is spread throughout the paper, taking about 60% space of the whole newspaper. The stories are usually intermeshed with other sections of the paper, like the advertisements.
<i>Sun Sport</i>	Both the local and international sports. On average it provides a scoreboard summary of final scores and a brief schedule of live sports coverage on television. The popular sport covered is soccer. Sport news usually covers 9 of the usually 45 to 48 pages.
<i>Sun Buzz</i>	Offers entertainment news regarding celebrities, music and movies. There are usually six pages dedicated to this section. Most of the pages focus on local South African celebrities, while about a page covers international celebrities. There are occasional extras in this section such as movie reviews. Television corner provides a selected schedule of programmes offered on both local and cable television. In the bottom section, there is a review of some recommended programs.
<i>Sun Help Yourself</i>	Education: for teachers, pupils and university students. When this section appears, an 8 page insert is placed in the middle of the paper. The section is mixed with adverts on money matters, cars, etc.
<i>Sun People's Ads</i>	Advertisements: family notices, services, general, properties, etc. Usually occupies about two pages.
<i>Sun Stuff</i>	The one page section relates tips and overviews of leisure activities, containing horoscopes, jokes, daily stars, crossword puzzles, bible verses and cooking tips and recipes.

<i>Sun Money</i>	Experts giving readers possible ways of making their money grow. For example, saving in <i>stokvels</i> ³ or in the bank. About a 12 page insert
<i>Speak Up</i>	Offers letters and readers' opinions on various issues. In the middle of the page is a "snapshot" of the winning letter of the day. The writer of the letter wins an amount of R100. The section occupies the second last page of the newspaper.
<i>Sun Snaps</i>	The previous night's news bites from all over 'Sunland'. The news accounts presented are brief and limited. A About half of the last page, the other half is usually an advert.
<i>Sun Snaparrazzi</i>	Daily prize competitions. Occupies about a quarter page
<i>Sun Power</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i> staff helping people solve their problems, e.g., family reunions, people having access to social grants and identity documents from the Home Affairs department. A quarter of a page and the other part contains tips and advice on health and beauty. There is also a section dedicated to relationship advice for readers with personal problems.

³ Stokvels are clubs or syndicates serving as rotating credit unions in South Africa where members contribute fixed sums of money to a central fund on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. Each month a different member receives the money in the fund, which was collected during that period, with no one ever defaulting on contributions. This collective saving and resource generation scheme is popular in rural and township communities of South Africa.

Similar to traditional newspapers, the lead story of the day occupies almost the entire page of the paper, filled in with colourful illustrations. Also, the front page briefly highlights the news of secondary importance that is available inside the paper. The highlights vary, including local, international, entertainment and sport news. From the above table, it is clear that the newspaper covers a variety of issues, even though it gives more space to local news which consists mainly of human-interest stories. It can thus be argued that it is these stories that give the paper its tabloid character, reflecting the ‘definitions’ of tabloids as “paper(s) whose stock in trade is the human interest, graphically told story, heavy on pictures ...”, as given by Bird (1992: 8-12). As indicated in the table above, the newspaper also covers important issues like education, entertainment as well as the arts. Importantly, it has regular feature columns where experts like doctors, lawyers and social workers provide free advice to readers who talk about their different problems.

The paper prioritises national or local news. Approximately two-thirds of space (about 60 percent) is devoted to local news items comprising soft stories and a little over a quarter of page space is devoted to international news (about 3 percent). A respondent from a student focus group confirmed how the paper takes a certain angle in its reporting, prioritising local news and writing little to do with international news:

Innocent: ... but I can see... other papers also concentrate on international news... there is no business news in this paper. Like Lyn said, some people are interested in the markets, what is happening in the business world etc. Coming to sports, there is no rugby, because they think it’s for the upper class, the ordinary people would not know anything about rugby. Looking at international soccer, there is only one page. So you can see ...

Thus, it can be argued that the paper’s news values draw attention to what kind of topics lay the basis for the reading experience.

Format, Layout and Style

The *Daily Sun* is characterised by bold poster style layout on the front page. The front page seems to be the major selling point of the paper. It is potentially what attracts the reader to buy the paper and to read further. To achieve this, the paper attempts to engage the reader through its bold, screaming headlines and pictures. The size and position of the photograph on the front page are essential codes for the readers as they affect the attention given to the paper. Thus, the photograph usually takes up half of the space given to the story, with the other half taken by the written report. An examination of the amount of space devoted to headlines, visuals and written text demonstrated that the latter was the most prominent layout element.

Browsing through the pages, I noted that news reporting consists mainly of snappy headlines and short stories on colourful pages, with the average story occupying about 10cm. The conciseness of the stories emerged to be one of the reasons why the participants enjoy reading the tabloid:

Interviewer: How would you compare the *Daily Sun* to other newspapers?

Thabani: Small and good to handle, short stories and simple language that does not waste your time... we don't have time for essays...

Martin: ... its portability. Look (*flipping through the pages*), I can hold open this paper in the taxi. It's small enough, I can't do that with the *Sunday Times*... It's portable, so it's not only the information that we value, it's also the tabloid style that is user-friendly.

Sizani: Oh yes, some brief stories, just a few lines...I like that, it saves time you know.

Looking at these characteristics, a point should be made about readers' capacity to discriminate in their selection of content. As Connell notes,

They (the readers) can go straight to the sports pages and then read nothing else or merely glance at what is presented on the other pages. Stories can be read in snatches, and it's worth noting that they are presented in a way which presupposes they will be. (1992: 67)

Such potential to read in snippets applies to all newspapers, but is especially promoted in the *Daily Sun*. Short, clearly demarcated stories suggest that readers can take in the content in easily digestible bits and pieces, aided by the prominence of images and graphical ‘hooks’ (Johansson, 2007: 103). These aspects of the format, in combination with the use of short sentences and plain language, contribute to the potential ease of use of the *Daily Sun*.

Throughout the paper, I also realised how news reports frequently link in with advertisements. A full-page advertisement appears on every other page, mainly placed between the local news sections. Smaller advertisements are scattered throughout the newspaper. Participants in this study, especially the student and women focus groups, confirmed an awareness of the effect of commercial pressures on the tabloid, for instance, in commenting on the competition between different newspapers and explaining that ‘they are good at putting those eye-catching stuff’, ‘they just want to make money’:

Lyn: Yeah, because they are in the business of making money so they write what they think will sell the paper.

Ayanda: Obviously tabloids have become a quicker option for people who would like to enter the media industry without so many hassles financially and content wise. .. some get into it for the money and without enough skills and end up having their content being heavily influenced by advertisers and the government because they begin to push political agenda to try and earn funding...

Thembie: ...especially with the *Daily Sun*, it’s evident that the role of the press as a ‘fourth estate’, like you mentioned during that discussion, has gone down especially due to commercial interests. It seems people, I mean, the producers, they are now mostly focusing on making more money. As a result, they spend more time thinking like, ok, what would sell more papers, but less time thinking whether that stuff is newsworthy. You see, and I think that thing is killing the media, or the newspaper industry.

In an in-depth interview, Thembie further highlighted the notion of how the *Daily Sun* has become market driven:

Thembie: Well, like I said earlier on, it looks like the *Daily Sun* is market-driven. It is treating news as a commodity. It's more focused on responding to market demand rather than being the voice of public opinion. Of course, I remember you saying that they (the publishers) claim to give the people "what they want", that is what is happening, instead of being the voice of public opinion. So, the notion of it being an instrument of public debate becomes irrelevant due to the market-driven nature of the newspaper.

A common claim about tabloids is that they do not use identified sources (see Johansson, 2007). My examination of the *Daily Sun* found no anonymous sources or unsupported assertions. However, the student focus group identified some stories in which the writers' names were not mentioned. The stories just indicated they were written 'By the *Daily Sun* Reporter'. Innocent, one of the student participants, despised the paper for not acknowledging the writers in some stories, arguing that it makes the newspaper lose its credibility:

Innocent: this one, they don't even care about where they got the story from. ...Here, (referring to a story) there is not even the name of the writer or what. We don't even know if they are facts or it's just something that is made up in the office.

As suggested by some authors, the tabloid news space has been dominated by soft topics— more than two-thirds (see Rooney, 2000; Connell, 1998) and local news, about 90 percent of the space (see Connell, 2008). This implies that news coverage of tabloids strongly stresses these attributes over hard and foreign news. Moreover, that emphasis has been constant over time as it was previously suggested by scholars like McLachlan and Golding (2000). I also noted the prominence of soft news stories. It seems the *Daily Sun* mostly pays attention to the everyday concerns of ordinary people. Family life and relationships are key concepts dealt with both in the news and in related columns, and so are daily concerns such as money troubles and readers' predicaments. Included in the daily concerns are the coverage of township stories, rumour-mongering, and 'unusual' stories. This aspect of the tabloid makes it attractive to its readers. This was confirmed by individuals from the male, the female, as well as the student focus groups:

Thembie: Tabloids sort of “think” profit first, which I think is the reason why they write those unusual stories, news exposés about superstitious stories, murder, scandals and celebrities. Of course, we do want to hear those unusual things... As a result, it is the sales of tabloids and their focus on entertainment that has made it so popular.

Thandi: Look at the kinds of stories they focus on. That’s what makes it interesting to me.

Interviewer: Which kinds of stories?

Thandi: Those stories about people rushing to buy pig’s blood, thinking that it’s lion’s blood, then they think they are going to be strong like the lion...about someone coming from the dead...about tokoloshes haunting families...you see. I obviously find something to do with the paper. But I don’t trust everything anyway...

Lindani: ... the *Daily Sun* is talking about ... the local things that we experience as black people. We see them in the streets, queuing for pig’s blood (*laughs*). I like their faith but I wouldn’t do it myself.

Unlike the conventional newspaper practice which locates the sport section at the back, the sport section of the *Daily Sun* is usually from page 13 to 20 or 21. Catching the reader’s eye with breaking sports news, sports pages appear to make up the bulk of the paper’s total volume. From its male readers, I noted the possibility of this being the most eagerly read section:

Interviewer: Tell me, which parts of the paper do you particularly like?

Siphon: ... I spent more time on the puzzles, the jokes, that kind of stuff. Oh! and also sports. Just to know how my team has done in the league.

Mandla: Yeah...I always struggle to get to the sports pages, worst it’s not on the last page like in other newspapers. I think they should try and improve on that, I mean the presentation of the stuff.

Sam: It’s very good in sport coverage...

Thabani: Obviously sports. And you see, with this paper, it’s delivered early in the morning, so at least we get the sports news before everybody else...

An important aspect highlighted is how the stories follow the narrative conventions and formulae already known to the readers from their cultural repertoires. As observed by Murray:

A narrative does not (usually) tell the reader about the story as traditional journalists do but as novelists and screen writers do. The narrative writer reveals the story so the reader watches and comes to the reader's own conclusions about the significance of the events the reader has observed. (2003: 98).

This is exactly how stories are written in the *Daily Sun*. Thus, the narrative style could also be influential in drawing the readers' attention to the content of the paper. This is because the way the stories are written makes it easier to follow the logic:

Thoko: ... the way they write the stuff, it's not difficult to read. The things just flow, they can easily be followed. Let me read this for you, so that you see what I'm talking about: "*Thugs are terrorising and robbing staff at Eastern Cape Hospitals*. Last week, a woman doctor was stabbed with a screwdriver at Dora Nginza Hospital in Port Elizabeth. She was on her way to her car in the parking area. A waiting thug pounced on her, stabbed her in the shoulder..." You see what I mean. It's that thing, I mean, you can see what happened first, and what followed. It's simple and straightforward.

From the interviewees it is clear that the paper's narrative style is familiar to its readers, and is thus one of the reasons for the paper's popularity. Supporting this viewpoint, Dahlgren points out that narratives have elements which culturally competent audiences can readily identify and these pre-structure and define the possible range of meanings which also help promote cultural integration (Dahlgren, 1992: 13).

Conclusion

This chapter has given an overview of the preliminary content analysis done prior to interviews. The aim of content analysis was to make clear the textual and visual elements that characterise the popular tabloid, the *Daily Sun*. The process also highlights how a variety of narrative and stylistic devices combine to create an accessible tabloid reading experience.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2/3rds of Daily Sun reader like to read for pleasure (Advertiser Survey Kuper Research, 2005)

Introduction

The textual analysis described in the previous chapter has produced an informed view of the content. This chapter explores how readers understand the *Daily Sun* by giving an account of their experiences of the *Daily Sun*'s content as entertainment. It provides an overview of the participants' newspaper preferences and their reading habits. The aim of the chapter is to give an understanding of the pleasures readers take from the style and modes of address of the paper, as well as their experiences of particularly well-liked content.

Readers' newspaper preference and reading habits

The *Daily Sun* remains the participants' major source of news, with 14 out of 20 of them reading it almost everyday. Some of them however read the tabloid twice or thrice per week. Nevertheless, the *Daily Sun* is not only their regular news source. In terms of other newspapers read on a regular basis, the additional choices were the two local (Eastern Cape) broadsheets, the *Daily Dispatch* and the *Herald*, and 5 of those who read another paper read Grahamstown's *Grocotts' Mail* very often. Their responses to why they read these publications, included the following: 'the *Daily Dispatch* is my home town news', '*Grocott's* because it is local... we happen to know what's happening in Grahamstown' and '*Daily Sun* because it is affordable'. Those who read the *Sunday Times* were mainly students and others who indicated that their interest in the paper is the careers pages. Thus, instead of mainly functioning as an alternative news source, the *Daily Sun* seems to work in conjunction with related news outlets, particularly with broadsheet newspapers.

Amongst the participants were those who read the mainstream newspapers in pursuit of ‘balanced’ news. The student and male focus groups acknowledged that the mainstream newspapers, especially the *Sunday Times*, provide objective news. Those who read other newspapers, especially the male and the student focus groups, argued that it is the desire to ‘fill in’ the gaps left by the *Daily Sun* in news provision. In other words, they want to get some other kinds of information that is not provided by the *Daily Sun*. For example, the student focus group mentioned some sections like the business news, other sports news like rugby as well as detailed stories about politicians as important issues to be acquainted with. They believed that reading the *Daily Sun* and other newspapers provided diverse and critical information not found in one newspaper:

Sam: ... I also love the *Mail and Guardian*, and even the *Sunday Times*. The thing is I love politics *uyabona* (you see). So, those are the papers...Plus, the other thing is, you can’t rely on one newspaper for information. You have to read at least two, and then you strike a balance between the facts...there is no one newspaper that is 100% true in presenting facts. At least, reading more than one will give you that critical mind to see beyond, you know what I mean.

Lukhanyo: ... we don’t only read the *Dispatch* and say what it has reported is true. We have to get the stories from a different angle. So at least, you can mix the *Dispatch* with the *Herald*

Listening to news on the radio, while less common, is also a habit of almost half of the participants, with *Umhlobo Wenene*⁴ and *CKI FM*⁵ being the most popular choices. The majority of the participants also watch news on television on a daily

⁴ *Umhlobo Wenene* FM is an Eastern Cape based South African national radio station that caters to the needs of the Xhosa -speaking community. It is the second largest radio station in the country, broadcasting in 7 of the 9 provinces of the country.

Source: http://www.nab.org.za/templates/member_template_39.asp

⁵ *CKI FM* is a music format youth radio station, targeting young people living in semi-urban areas of the Eastern Cape, aged 16 – 34. The station broadcasts in English and IsiXhosa, 60% and 40% respectively.

Source: http://www.nab.org.za/templates/member_template_76.asp

basis unless they are not at home during the prime time news. Student participants also watch community television in their residences. The only major news medium not commonly used is the internet, possibly due to lack of access: only the students and one reader (Ayanda) who is a secretary in a government office, noted that they also access news online.

Looking at the participants' responses regarding their news consumption, it can be concluded that they are intense news consumers. The fact that they use the print media selectively confirms the active audience theory which argues that people consume media based on their socio-cultural backgrounds (see Hall, 1980). In that view, newspaper preference and reading habits are largely influenced by their identities and personal relationships to the broader political formations.

An important characteristic that emerged is the selective reading or browsing that readers do. It can be argued that this type of reading is encouraged by the tabloid format. Participants were keen to point out that they usually 'flick through' the pages, browsing back and forth between headlines and favourite sections, and may only read a small amount of the content. Many of the male sports fans explained that their first destination would be the back pages:

Johnson: When we get hold of a newspaper, especially *thina amadoda* (we, men), we get tempted to do this (turns to the last page of the newspaper) for sports, then other news later. I don't know what's wrong with this paper (the *Daily Sun*), the sport pages are hidden inside. Usually it's the last page.

Siphon: ... I just browse through from the first to the last ...I spend more time on the sports...

Mandla: I always rush through to get to the sports pages. Unfortunately here, it's not on the last page like in other newspapers...

The ease with which the paper could be picked up and put down, further highlights that it could easily be fitted into daily routines such as commuting or short breaks from work. Nevertheless, while the style of reading appeared part of an everyday

activity and readers put substantial efforts in selecting parts of the content, some newsworthy events would change the papers' status from a 'flick-through' companion to a valuable source of information. For instance, the women focus group highlighted that the 'mysterious' stories covered by the tabloid make readers want to 'read all about it':

Naledi: You see these stories, you can't ignore them... you have to read the whole story to get the details of what happened, in case it may happen to you. I think that is the reason why they put the stories on the main page, because they grab the attention of the readers... when you buy the paper because of that particular story, it means you are interested in knowing the whole story. So it's not like we flip through every page. ... but the serious stories, we do read them, especially *thina abafazi* (we, the women), because we are usually the victims of these bad stories.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Naledi: ... *thina abafazi* (we, women), most bad things happen to us, our children disappear mysteriously from our homes, we get killed *ngabayeni bethu* (by our husbands) because they want to use our blood to get rich or to have lots of money. So when we read that it happened to another woman, we will be careful enough ... so we take the stories seriously at times.

What is noteworthy is that while the habit of reading newspapers is usually integrated into routine activities, reading also happens in a more focused way—especially when particular needs are identified.

Perceptions of the *Daily Sun*

During the discussion about the *Daily Sun* in relation to other newspapers, I noted that respondents were aware of the paper's position in the newspaper market. Student and male interviewees, in particular, acknowledged that the *Daily Sun* differed significantly from broadsheets like the *Sunday Times*, which some readers perceived as for 'the executives'. Mid-market tabloids like the *Sowetan* were seen as more 'newsy', while the *Daily Sun* was perceived as the least serious in its reporting. Some described the stories as 'made up', 'unbelievable' and 'strange'. As highlighted later in the chapter, a group of female readers had different opinions, perceiving the paper

as providing reliable and up to date information that is not different from what they see on television. Amongst the female focus group, Thoko (a hairdresser in her twenties) argued that the *Daily Sun* is “just like any other newspaper”. Participants, especially from the student focus group as well as some individuals from the male focus group, were also able to relate the physical texture of the paper to ‘quality’ and ‘cost’, which are then seen in terms of assumed news values:

Innocent: Again look at the quality of this paper, it looks cheaper than the others. So, maybe R1, 80 is worth it (*laughter*)...If they put a higher price, people wouldn’t buy it.

Lukhanyo: I think the price is good as it is. It’s like, it goes with what you get from the paper...there isn’t anything serious in the *Daily Sun* that you can say ok, the paper has to be expensive.

Sam: I don’t think anyone can buy the paper if it goes for R5.00. Well, unless maybe, if they also increase on the stuff. I mean, in terms of quality. This is cheap quality, from the paper to the contents.

Siphon: Because what we pay for here is the stuff inside. So if the price goes up, so should be the stuff. The quality has to improve. The way the paper is cheap shows that the stuff inside is also cheap, for cheap people, from cheap journalists and cheap sources (*big laughter*)...

I also realised how age and education levels determined how far readers valued the newspaper. Even though my focus groups were not divided into different age groups, responses about the paper were to some extent related to age and educational levels. Older readers were more guarded, describing the paper as ‘reliable’ and as an alternative newspaper. The younger readers as well, especially the group of students, highlighted their reasons for their preferred tabloid, using words such as ‘funny’, and ‘so rich in soft news’ to describe it. Ironically, amongst the same group of people were some readers who seemed to denounce the *Daily Sun* and other tabloids for not being ‘proper’ newspapers, despite them also being ‘typical’ readers of the newspaper, and having a broad knowledge of its content. The following comments from student readers indicate how such vilifications were linked to perceptions of a ‘typical’ reader as lacking in intellectual ability:

Queen: ... the *Daily Sun* is meant for the uneducated people.

Interviewer: (interrupting). Why do you think so? (Feeling uncomfortable with ‘uneducated people’)

Queen: ... they are the ones more interested in those stories and they can be easily convinced. They believe whatever they hear and see. It's like, it's for (*uses fingers to indicate quoting*) 'that other person' who probably doesn't really understand the more complicated stuff.

Interviewer: You read the *Daily Sun* yeah? Does it mean you are uneducated?

Queen: No-o... then there are those like me who just read for funny, but the stories are meant for those that I have just mentioned...

Johnson: ... I think those who have the intellectual capacity think big, like how I can make more money, while the less educated is busy thinking that I should amputate a goat for *muthi* to get the money, thinking of selling pig's blood or to steal the money...those who are well equipped with knowledge will think of other better ways of making money for example, money markets and disposal of under-utilised resources, so I think it's about the intellectual capacity of the people.

Within the student group, the *Daily Sun* was critiqued for its poor journalistic standards, evident in descriptions of the paper as 'not so serious', or as shown in the previous quote, in the use of defensive adverbs such as 'just' to defend the reading. Repeated comparisons of the *Daily Sun* to other papers disregarded the tabloid, further reflecting it as an inferior, or at least a 'less serious' form of journalism. These descriptions are similar to those of tabloid critics in terms of the tabloids' journalistic value.

Nevertheless, in spite of the students' negative attitudes towards the tabloid, perceptions of who the newspaper is aimed at were diverse in all the focus groups, with some arguing that it is for women, others saying it is for everyone in the lower social and economic class. In depth individual interviews with both Ayanda and Thembe produced the same arguments:

Ayanda: ...the media and their target audiences easily reflect the various social classes that exist in South Africa, because obviously the things that interest a big business man are more likely to be in *Mail and Guardian* as opposed to a 'small' business man who still wants to buy a vending machine who would read the *Daily Sun*. I think it (the *Daily Sun*) has quite a following among the people on the ground. Most status conscious people are not keen of it, not because of anything but because for a long time most people have come to associate it with the common mass. I don't know of any high class who read it, but a few

middle class read it... Ironically, these tabloids carry stories about the common man on the ground who the government and the big shots are supposed to be serving, so would naturally have to read about it if they wanted to be acquainted with their daily problems. Unfortunately, they don't.

Thembie: Definitely, the content of a newspaper in working-class culture is quite different from that in middle-class or ruling-class culture. That's why we can say the *Daily Sun* is playing a kind of role in the social, cultural, and political life of the black working class in South Africa. Then the *Sunday Times* or the *Mail and Guardian*, we could say it's also serving the middle or the ruling class people. And it goes like that.

Thabani: There's no doubt, it's our paper, it has got what we want, the things that we talk about *erenkini* (at the taxi ranks).

Khaya: ... for women in the poverty circles. The economy is at the hands of the men.

Interviewer: Why do you think it's for women?

Khaya: They love tabloids, and they are the ones who usually contribute to tabloid material. They write about their problems, they want to be in the newspaper, seeing themselves in the entertainment pages...

Innocent: ... it does not discriminate anyone.

Lyn: ... it involves everyone. The fact that it is interested in issues of celebrities shows that it targets youngsters. Then these, like '*Evil thugs rob our church*', it is eye-catching to the elderly within the society. So ... it encompasses everyone. It targets all the age groups.

Thoko: ... the fact that they report about ordinary people means that it's for everyone who is in that category. Be they men, women boys and girls. ... it tries to aim for everyone, especially by the different sections it contains.

Lindani: Mm...mm. ... My kids love the crosswords...that educational stuff for grades 11 and 12, it's good for them....so it's for everyone.

Some of these comments came from groups in which negative connotations of the tabloid had previously been mentioned. For example, Innocent and Lyn were part of the student focus group which denounced the paper for not being a proper one, but they also agreed with readers from both the male and female focus groups that the *Daily Sun* is for everyone. An important comment came from Khaya, who is a petrol attendant. He argued that the *Daily Sun* is targeted at women. Probing him further, his argument was that women love tabloids and besides, he argued there are more stories

about women in the paper than in other newspapers. Khaya's view is similar to that expressed in the Gender and Media Baseline Study (GMBS) which found that tabloid help-lines are flooded with calls from women because they are far more effective at fighting crime and finding lost children than the local police station. In this view, instead of disregarding tabloids, gender and media analysts need to take note of the social contribution that tabloids make (Gender Links, 2007).

However, other research done by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) shows that while tabloids have more human-interest stories than their mainstream counterparts, and are clearly more accessible, women's views and voices are just as under-represented in this medium as in the mainstream press. Overall, women constitute only 25% of news sources in tabloids in the three countries (South Africa, Mauritius and Tanzania) monitored (Gender Links, 2007). Contrary to claims that tabloids give women more voice than the mainstream media, there is little difference in their participation as sources in different topic categories. As with the GMMP, results revealed that tabloids under-represent women's views in all topic categories, especially in sports, politics and economics (Gender Links, 2007). Unlike the mainstream media in which women had more to say than men only on the topic of gender equality, in tabloids, men's views dominate even in this category. The only category in which women's views predominated in tabloids was health, followed by celebrity news (Gender Links, 2007).

Nevertheless, besides being perceived as aimed at women, the notion of the *Daily Sun* as aimed at ordinary people was described as a central part of the appeal, particularly with the identification between 'ordinary' and 'us' from both male and female focus groups. Excluding the student focus group, the 'ordinary people' in this regard appeared to have a closer sense of connection to the newspaper, which is considered for them. Yet from my observation, the many hesitations and silences that I noted when we discussed this issue highlighted how talking about one's social class in relation to the reading was not easy, and how these readers were negotiating very complex identity positions.

Tabloid reading: a ‘public’ practice

Related to the public nature of the reading of the *Daily Sun*, is the way it seems to be part of wider social activity. Contrary to perceptions of newspaper reading as a personal act, the *Daily Sun* provides opportunities to read and discuss the content together. Male and female focus groups testified that they read the paper in public spaces such as the taxis, the streets, under the shade during lunch hour, as well as in their homes. This notion reiterates Pursehouse’s (1992) study of tabloid readers. He found that tabloids feature as a public element in the working day of the male readers (1992: 104), whereas women preferred reading tabloids in private spaces. In this respect, my study was different: it indicated that the women participants also read the paper at their workplaces, especially during the lunch break when they can discuss the stories of the day:

Interviewer: But, do you ever get to read the paper together as friends, family, or...?

Ayanda: ... when we have the time... or when we are cleaning the church in preparation for the Sunday Service...

Thoko: ...Almost everyone in the family wants to browse through the pages, so we pass it around...

Sizani: We usually go *ngasemva kwaCheckers* (behind Checkers, at the parking bay), under those small shades for lunch. We sit there and take turns with the newspaper...

Naledi: ... the thing is we can’t buy the same copy all of us, so if one of us buys the paper, then we all read the same copy... And *kube mnandi* (it will be nice) to read together because when you read something and you see it’s good, you want to share it with your colleagues and also get to know what they think about it...

Story Sharing

The fact that the *Daily Sun* is read both in private and public spaces highlights that the paper has a possibility of generating conversation amongst the readers. From all the focus groups, it emerged that on many occasions readers talk and sometimes joke about something they had read. This was particularly highlighted by a group of mixed male and female interviewees, when some of them recounted how a bizarre news story in the *Daily Sun* provided an opportunity to share funny moments:

- Interviewer:** Do you talk about what you read in the *Daily Sun* with other people?
- Khaya:** Yeah...in case they didn't see or read it. Like, there was this couple complaining that a *tokoloshe* had ruined their marriage. They said it's now more than ten years they haven't been intimate in their bedroom. Each time they try to become intimate, they get separated by a force that they don't understand where it is coming from (*laughter*)...
- Thabani:** I read that one... my mother felt pity for the couple, and we just laughed at her... how do they know that it was an evil spirit haunting their sexual life...some of these stories, you at times read and you feel like 'oh, this trash'.
- Ayanda:** I think it just happens naturally, that you read about something. Then you think of the other person. The next thing you ask that person, 'have you heard about so-and-so.' Then we discuss it for a couple of minutes. Worse the stories in this paper, they are just something to talk about. They make people talk.
- Thoko:** Yeah, like, you read about someone having raped a dog or a goat. That's the type of stories you read about in this paper. So, obviously, they generate conversations.

From Thabani's interest in the rather tragic story, it is noteworthy that readers might use such 'serious' content to tap into a general frame of humour - suggestive of how pleasure sometimes supersedes the aspect of 'news'. It is also evident that such strange human interest stories are more closely connected to the prevalent idea of the newspaper as funny and humorous, which will be discussed in detail later in the chapter. Such an entertaining function could be taken as showing that the *Daily Sun*, for readers, has little significance to wider aspects of news as political communication, as they can be interpreted as focusing on other aspects of an individual's life.

Undeniably, it is the lively tabloid news style of the *Daily Sun* that contributes to the experience of the reading as worth sharing. The fact that the style can make news memorable for audiences was obvious in how participants repeatedly reproduced some of the stories they had read during the discussion and those that they read before. This could be indicative that the way tabloids express news and other matters has obviously made an imprint on readers, who have become familiar with the style and are able to reproduce it in everyday talk.

Knowledge and Habit

Knowledge and habit were some of the themes that emerged when readers explained their involvement with the *Daily Sun*. Participants across the board frequently stressed awareness and familiarity with the particular paper. From knowing the paper, others indicated that they have become habitual buyers and readers of the *Daily Sun*:

Thembie: It's one aspect about human beings. We do something, it becomes a habit...like, when men are coming from work they buy the newspaper and take it home even if they don't read it... It's a habit... I don't know, it's just habitual to buy newspapers...

Sizani: Yeah, *thina* (we) at home, we started reading this paper when my mother used to bring it home after work...we then just continued buying it... it's because you just get used to the paper ... even if you don't have time to read it ... you try to swop to another paper, it won't be as appealing as the one you are used to, then you are forced to go back to your paper. It's just like how we are used to the type of flavours of the soft drinks that we prefer...

Lindani: It's like people have come to buy it out of habit... you get used to buying the paper ... you can't afford to miss a copy. ...it's sort of addictive, you know what I mean.

As demonstrated in Sizani's words, it seems that family members are influential in building awareness and readership of the paper, guaranteeing a kind of acquaintance with the tabloid style and content that would frame the reading as easy. Their practice confirms Carey's view of media use as 'ritualistic' (see Carey, 1989). Gregory et al argue that to count as a ritual, media use must be more than a habit or routine:

When media use is more than a habit or a circumstantial choice, when there is a sense of obligation or propriety, then that media use may well be ritualistic, providing a means of contact with the serious life. (2005: 16)

The concept of ritual has been used to explain diverse cultural practices and forms, including different aspects of the mass media, both in the analysis of media texts and to account for various patterns of production and reception. In the conception of communication as ritual, one understands communication as a process in and through which society is created, maintained, and transformed—a process within which the

world is made to mean (Carey, 1989: 18). As evident in the definition, the ritual view of communication is linked to terms such as “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” and “fellowship”. The definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms “commonness,” “communion,” “community,” and “communication.” (Gregory et al, 2005: 16). Here, the role of communication is to construct and maintain a shared and meaningful cultural realm:

If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality. (Carey, 1989:18)

Carey uses newspaper reading as an example of ritual behaviour. According to him, newspaper reading is a ritual because it does more than communicate news. Moreover, under the concept of ‘news’, the newspaper represents a more or less stable image of the order of reality and how it can be grasped (Carey, 1989: 21). That is to say, the newspaper tells us not what is new, but how the world around us essentially is. Newspaper reading as a ritual is therefore a question of the satisfaction of knowing that ‘things’, after all, have a fundamental order and structure (Carey, 1989:21). Given this ritual view of communication, ‘the news’ is less information, than it is drama. The news describes a situation of dramatic actors and activities in which the reader is invited to participate. In that way, readers imagine themselves as having a role in the drama (Carey, 1989: 21). Thus, the newspaper mirrors reality, but also constitutes an arena for action.

Besides buying the *Daily Sun* out of habit, there was widespread description of the *Daily Sun* as ‘an easy read’. Despite the negative comments on the journalistic quality, there were also more positive descriptions of the paper. Mostly, a group of male readers who are in the construction and shoe making industry, as well as Khaya who is a petrol attendant, acknowledged that it is the tabloid format that makes the reading experience easy:

Khaya: ... that simple English, short stories and township stories... is also affordable, good size compared to *Sunday Times*.

- Thabani:** ...it's small and good to handle, short stories and simple language ... With other newspapers, you have to look up in the dictionary for the meanings of some words... *Yonk'into* (everything) is straightforward.
- Sizani:** Oh yes, some brief stories, just a few lines...I like that, it saves time.
- Ayanda:** The nice thing about *Daily Sun* is that it is affordable as well to the common man on the ground and is written in a language and format that is understandable to all.

In an individual in depth interview with Innocent, a postgraduate student, he attributed the success of the *Daily Sun* to the format, further arguing that tabloids are the future of newspapers:

Interviewer: From our interviews, many attributed the success of the *Daily Sun* to the short format. What is your view on that?

Innocent: Personally, I think it is the format, I mean, that of the *Daily Sun*. So, maybe we can say that the publishers realised this demand before. And I think the trend is destined to continue in the future. I also think that the development is in line with the lifestyle of the readers. Look at all the portable computer-type equipment that is becoming smaller and smaller. It's amazing. So, I think with this format (of the *Daily Sun*), newspaper producers should realise that readers are no longer just in a daily newspaper market, nor a media market. They are also in a time market (*laughter*). Serious, people don't have the time to read the thick "daily everything", you know... In this fast-moving society the tabloid paper is slowly becoming a cement block that weighs down mobile readers. Like we said in the group discussion, it's very easy and possible to read and turn the pages, even amongst a crowd. Then with those eye-catching graphics or photographs, you find the next person seated next to you wanting to borrow your copy. It's fast becoming contagious to read a tabloid. I think they will eventually become the conventional newspapers. I guess thinking of tabloids as trashy is a myth that must be broken down.

As demonstrated above, it appears that the *Daily Sun* is also read for convenience. It could also highlight the ease with which readers are able to fit their newspaper reading into their daily schedules, especially for its aptness for fast looks and 'flick-through' reading mentioned earlier in the chapter. All the same, describing the reading as 'easy' may also have to do with the cognitive processes of making sense of the content, which draws on readers' experiences and expectations of the newspaper, on

their understanding of the subject matter of the paper, and importantly, on literacy levels. Knowledge of format and form has an effect on the understanding of the reading as well. Being knowledgeable about the type of content gives a background knowledge that assists in the understanding of the content. The focus of the *Daily Sun* on the popular, personal and the everyday can be regarded as facilitating this process, drawing on concrete reference points from which to explore the issues at hand. Comments like ‘it has got what we want, the things that we talk about *erenkini* (at the taxi ranks)’, ‘talks about us and the things that are happening to us in the township’ show how the readers acknowledge the *Daily Sun*’s focus on ‘day-to-day things’, unlike how they understand the broadsheets’ emphasis on news outside of their direct experiences, such as political or business news. As part of their positive reception of the paper, readers from different focus groups felt the tabloid takes a particular focus on local life, as epitomised in this comparison between the *Daily Sun* and other newspapers:

Innocent: ... other papers concentrate on international news. This one, its target market is *thina abantu baseMdantsane* (we, the people from Mdantsane). Even the entertainment section, it’s the upcoming artists from the locations...

Naledi: ... This one (the *Daily Sun*) looks more or less for people like us, who don’t have money (she relies on the social grant from the government), and we know about the stories that they write about, and we see them happening, especially here in the location...

Tina: The *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian*, I just see them in the shops. They write serious stories that are not interesting. But my son buys them on Sundays. With this one (the *Daily Sun*), you can be laughing when you are reading, and it is not very difficult, although I don’t understand some of the words...

Social Utility

While the popular *Daily Sun* was often linked with laughter and the softer side of life, it was also taken very seriously by some of its readers. Speaking to a group of female interviewees in a focus group, the overwhelming response from them was that they trusted the tabloid to bring them reliable information as well as up to date news that enable them to negotiate the conditions of everyday life:

Tina: What I like is that this paper gives information about what is happening out there daily, and even some bad things that young children are doing when they are away from us.

Interviewer: Things like what?

Naledi: Yeah, it's true what she is saying. Especially boys, they do a lot my dear. You can hear that your son has killed someone in that location, or he goes out at night to do drugs with his friends, *abanye* (some) are raping women at the bar. So, we see these things in the *Daily Sun* and we know we have to watch out and deal with our kids, telling them what is right and what is wrong.

Thoko: Plus, I think just like any other newspapers, it also gives information on what's happening in different provinces, some of which we even see on television. So at least, we also keep updated

Thandi: The *Daily Sun* is good. They respond faster to people's problems. If you tell them your house has been robbed, or your daughter has been raped they don't delay to come and they write the story in the paper. I think it helps other people to be careful with their property.

In a complex consumer society, the *Daily Sun* sets out to act as a helper and advisor for the readers. The paper seems to provide assistance in the whole range of activities connected to the everyday roles of the readers. According to Eide (1997: 177), this information service can be seen as a device to build an alliance: to make a contract with the readers. When such contracts are no longer provided through traditional genres - such as news reports, the *Daily Sun* pages do the job. They address a life world where information does matter for the readers, not a system world where the readers' possibilities for action are limited. This is 'news-you-can-use' – the newspaper becomes a 'use-paper' (Eide 1997, 177).

Thandi's sentiments above show a level of trust invested in the tabloid. Ironically, this trust could be expected to be reserved for public institutions like the police, the courts and the government. Furthermore, while the task of community surveillance and information about society might be seen as the least requirement of democratic media, it must be noted that in the post-apartheid South Africa, the fulfilling of these functions by tabloid papers like the *Daily Sun* constitute the reinstallation of a notion of citizenship that the majority was deprived of under apartheid (Wasserman, 2008:7).

This restoration of citizenship is of significance to the continued democratic change in South Africa, since the experience of marginalisation is still real in the post-apartheid context (Wasserman, 2008: 7).

Again, taking from Naledi's comment about their 'boys' going out at night to do all sorts of crime, it is apparent that she sees the *Daily Sun* as performing a function of shocking the community into wanting to do something about the high crime rate and corruption. As evident above, women readers especially reported that they can learn moral lessons from some of the sensational stories they read. So, at least there is a sense of morality that is being engendered by the tabloid stories. Therefore, no matter how critical people may be of tabloids, when investigating tabloids as new or different forms of popular media products, we need to appreciate that assessment of their success or failure rests with the readers themselves. From the above arguments, it is therefore essential that traditional journalists need to accept that there are new ways of practising journalism. In other words, they need to expose themselves more to post modern writing and thinking on how the media can operate within society, particularly in an emerging multicultural democracy like South Africa where access to the media was previously denied, and in which many subcultures are emerging (Viney, 2008, in *The Media*).

Sport and gossip

The tabloid's focus on areas such as sport and gossip generated a lengthy discussion, indicating that these are also well-liked reading material. 'Gossip' was mainly taken to include celebrity coverage. Essentially, I noted that these sections were gender-coded, with male readers preferring the sport pages, while women participants preferred the gossip pages. Despite perceiving celebrity gossip as a 'guilty pleasure', many female readers admitted to it being one of their reasons for reading the paper. Except for Ben and Mandla, most of the male participants were reluctant to admit liking 'gossip', with responses such as 'sensational and hinging on nudity' and 'derogative'. On the other hand, while female interviewees were particularly negative about the sport section, male readers commended the *Daily Sun* for its widespread coverage and breaking sports news:

Interviewer: Which part of this newspaper do you like most?

Thabani Obviously sports...

Interviewer: Naledi, do you agree?

Naledi: No *mtanami* (my baby), izinto zabafana ezo (that's boys' stuff) (*laughter*)

Tendai: The gossip pages are relaxing, we get to know which celebrity has been spotted in the limelight...

I noted that the pleasure taken from the sport coverage was related to televised coverage. Male interviewees enjoyed reading about games, especially soccer, which they would have watched on television the previous day. Probing further why they love reading about the games they would have watched on television, some responses were:

Xolani: ... when we watch soccer on TV, we concentrate on action, we ignore the commentators...to know what they (the commentators) think about the game, we have to read it in the newspapers.

Khaya: Plus, if we just talk about it on our own, we obviously become biased towards our teams... if we read about it, our biases and doubts will be cleared, you see.

From the above comments, the interplay between televised and printed texts is highlighted. Thus, the *Daily Sun* seems to take the interpreter role, reproducing the soccer episode into a meaningful narrative, while at the same time stirring the enjoyment gained from watching, and generating new ones through an endorsed version of the event. Accordingly, just as the sports writing could be treasured for its familiar tone, it is also appreciated for providing an interpretive structure to the game which readers participate in on a daily basis.

The differences expressed by male and female readers in this study also emerged in Bird's analysis of supermarket tabloid reading. From her study (1998), female respondents admitted to using tabloid stories in a personal, family-orientated fashion, for instance, by trading gossip stories with friends or family members, while the male

readers tended to focus on aspects that in one way or the other added to their knowledge about the outside world. However, from these observations, Bird draws a line which puts men and women's interest in the reading material as polar opposites, with women using tabloids to negotiate their personal world, while at the same time, men tend to use the tabloids as 'news' or 'information' that helps them find out about the world outside them (Bird, 1998: 144).

Humour and fun

The gossip issue discussed above seemed to bring a sense of humour and fun in the participants. Talking to them about what they like about the *Daily Sun*, common descriptions were of the reading as 'fun'. Descriptive statements from a group of male readers such as 'the *Sun Babe* for pleasing the eye', 'browse through for the latest funny stories' '... love the jokes and gossips', became evident that experiences of enjoyment are central to the buying and the reading of the paper. Student as well as the group of male participants revealed that part of the pleasure originated from the comical headlines, humorous jokes, scandalous celebrity stories as well as the pictures.

Celebrity stories turned out to be one of the most popular elements in the *Daily Sun*. Studies on the use of celebrity content emphasized that such material stimulates social interaction (see Bird, 1992, Hermes, 1999). Previous research has pointed to how celebrity stories can play a role in the negotiation of social norms, and a main part of the conversations about these focused on morality (see Bird, 1992, Hermes, 1999). In this study, it was also evident that celebrity stories were the cause of much enjoyment and laughter:

Tendai: But it's nice knowing about those people (celebrities/famous people).

Tina: ... everyone wants to know what is happening in the lives of these people... it is interesting to read about their glamorous life...

Ben: ... the *Sun Babe* rocks man, I'm sure all men love that page (*laughs*). Women may not be interested in it because they think the media isn't

doing justice by sort of making them ‘cheap’, you know, but most men, I know, I am saying this from experience, we do like it.

Mandla: ... people love them, they say they are models, they are beautiful

Ben: I think that’s where the fun comes from...

Readers, on the one hand, perceived celebrities as dwelling in different and glamorous worlds, while on the other hand, they stressed the human qualities of individual characters. The following extracts indicate that the interviewees’ perceived differences from celebrities allow them to imagine themselves in different roles, thereby working as a welcome change from the routines of everyday life:

Mandla: Mm...mm. Look at Khanyisile Mbau⁶. She loves the media. She wants to tell everyone how many cars she has, where she buys her kid’s clothes... she’s too flashy man.

Sam: ... not all of them are like that. Look at Zola ⁷. Everyone loves him, even the elders. He’s done a great job for many South Africans. So, it’s an individual thing.

Interviewer: But, reading about those people’s lives, can you somehow relate those to your own lives, or...?

Siphon: Yeah, like... Zola is a good guy. Everyone wants to be like him...having lots of money like him... having such a heart like his.

Lukhanyo: Some of them are really a source of inspiration...But it comes with hard work.

Sizani: Yeah...we can relate to their lifestyle, and we want to be like them. I think it’s inspiring...one day you will also have those lots of monies, you see. Like, we wish that we were like them.

⁶ Khanyisile Mbau, popularly known as the queen of bling and a gold-digger, is a musician and an actress who is known for bragging about how rich she is.

⁷ Zola 7, whose real name is Thembinkosi Dlamini, is a poet, kwaito musician and actor. He also presents his show ‘Zola 7’ on SABC 1, which is dedicated to listening to people’s dreams and making them come true. Each weekly episode sees Zola responding to someone’s plea for assistance with something in their lives - they write to him, he gets involved, magic things happen and by the end of it something they have wished for comes true.

As indicated above, most of the readers expressed how they enjoy reading about celebrities' lives, with a few arguing it to be an unfair intrusion into their privacy. This was mainly revealed in the discussion with student participants:

Interviewer: How do you feel when you read such stories?

Thembi: ... it's really bad because they don't mind violating other people's right to privacy...

Johnson: Mm-m paparazzi will always be paparazzi.

Martin: But the case is two sided... in as much as one is a public person, he needs to have a private life and this must not be compromised by anybody especially the media...at the same time, seeing that person as a role model to the society as a community, we want to know what they do behind us.

Interviewer: Why is that of interest?

Martin: ... some of us are taking that person as a role model. For example, *Utata* (father) Mandela, I would like to know the things that he does outside the political world.

Interviewer: But would you like it if you were one of the celebrities and the *Daily Sun* says oh, here is Martini bla bla bla....

Martin: I think that is common knowledge, I wouldn't want that.

Innocent: ... that means the media is a social voice, the social commentator of our society....it's like a watchdog, especially to the celebrities. Let's say Martin is a huge celebrity and the media want him to be in the SRC, they can do that but if they want him to fall they can do that again... that is the power of the media...Look at Zuma, the media pulled him down because of his corruption and rape charges, now they want him as the president of the country (*big laughter*).

The differences between the readers' and the celebrities' lives seem to make the adventure of reading more enjoyable. The 'pleasure of the text' is an essential building block to journalism, and this seems predominantly evident in tabloid journalism (see Bird, 1998; 2000; Langer, 1998). Langer draws attention to 'the grip of the narrative, the savouring of the story' despite the fact that it is news, or perhaps because of 'the narrative status as news, as "the real"', as a main attraction of tabloid news (Langer, 1998: 158). On the other hand, Bird sees how lively and dramatic qualities add to making news memorable and pleasurable for audiences.

It seems the way the *Daily Sun* provides an entertaining experience based on day-to-day struggles is also bridged by another essential aspect of the readers' enjoyment. The paper draws on issues of collectivism and a dialogic approach to summon an image of the reader-paper relationship as based on shared values and interests. On a reception level, the idea of community can however be used to appreciate a number of reading pleasures, to some extent related to readers' understandings of the collective identities as communicated in the paper, and partly to the use of it in the social settings of everyday life. Maybe the most obvious way in which the thought of community is useful to appreciate the role of the newspaper is to recognise its significance in the readers' social life. Tabloid reading has been regarded as a social activity, highlighted in how some of the participants would read the paper together, in the focus on gossip and evident in the often lively focus group discussions. An important purpose of the reading was to reinforce social bonds with others, as exemplified in how the stories generate conversations amongst the readers, giving them something to talk about for the day.

In view of that, such sociability can be seen as a major use of news in general, and is particularly facilitated through tabloid newspapers (see Jensen, 1992: 230; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 55-57). Though the reading contributes to a sense of shared experience in the immediate social sphere, it also appears to extend to a wider readership, partly generating a feeling of connectedness with other readers. Comments on the newspaper's inclusiveness and attractiveness, such as 'everyone loves the paper' or on social interaction on a wider level, such as 'we discuss about the things we read in the paper' reflect the way sociability as part of tabloid reading is not only a question of day-to-day interaction, but also of seeing oneself as part of a more widespread collective of readers (see Johansson, 2007). This sociability can be seen as extending a sense of shared interests both within the immediate social circle and within a more abstract collective.

Conclusion

This chapter continued to present the main findings of the research in terms of the readers' newspaper preferences and reading habits. It revealed that the *Daily Sun* is part of a wider news landscape, for the readers seem to use a variety of interconnected news sources, particularly other newspapers as well as broadcast news. It is therefore evident that tabloid reading correlates with other areas of popular culture, intensifying and strengthening experiences drawn from these. Within this media landscape, everyday habits and routines lay the way for making sense of the newspaper. Certainly, the reading itself contributes to a very strong structure of familiarity, which readers experience as important for their attachment to the paper. Comparisons with other newspapers varied between negative and critical perceptions of the *Daily Sun* as 'trash' and 'cheap', and other more positive responses to it as 'an easy read' and 'fun'. Such conflicting discourses can furthermore be viewed as connected to vague perceptions of the readers own identity in relation to the reading, particularly when touching upon social class.

For the participants, reading the *Daily Sun* is a highly public practice, occurring at home, work, and other social gathering places. The main attractions of the newspaper are the usually 'soft' tabloid focuses, such as human interest, sport, horoscopes and celebrity stories. On one level, the pleasure of this type of content is another way of dealing with day-to-day problems, where the tabloid, particularly through the use of humour, offers an opportunity for recreation and the release of general everyday anxieties. The majority of the participants perceived the tabloid as helping to clarify complex issues. The social interaction around, and participatory nature of, tabloid reading further points to the potential of popular journalism in encouraging participation in a public forum. This means that tabloids provide access to a news forum and, publicly read and debated, they can bring together certain social groups to information about public affairs.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted the pleasures readers take from the style and modes of address of the *Daily Sun*, as well as their experiences of particularly well-liked content. A close examination of the discussion in the previous chapter opens up analysis of the cultural and even political roles of material often dismissed as ‘trivial’. Bearing this in mind, this chapter considers other ways in which the *Daily Sun* appeals to its readers. It also considers the ways in which material gleaned from the *Daily Sun* is appropriated and integrated into the readers’ daily lives. In that way, the chapter further highlights how the *Daily Sun* in an advanced market democracy like South Africa has assumed the task of ‘service journalism’ – responding to and offering commentary and advice on the everyday concerns of its audiences. In contrast to public service journalism, service journalism ‘represents the development of a hybrid social identity – part citizen, part consumer, part client – that is oriented to resolving the problems of everyday life’ (Eide & Knight, 1999: 527). This form of journalism, which provides help, advice, guidance and information for the management of self and everyday life, continues to expand as a response to the growing scepticism, hostility and resistance towards dependency on established forms of professional expertise and the demand for greater individual autonomy (Eide & Knight, 1999: 527).

Readers’ lived experience and content appreciation of the *Daily Sun*

The content of the *Daily Sun* seems relevant to the interviewees. While other tabloids such as the *Sowetan* were perceived as too ‘text-heavy’ and conservative in their views, and the ‘quality’ *Sunday Times* and the *Mail and Guardian* were often thought of as ‘for the executives’ – the *Daily Sun* was appreciated for being non-elitist, ‘informal’ and ‘simple’, for voicing the concerns of ordinary people, for its affordable

price, and importantly, for making ordinary people visible in news discourse. This visibility provided a crucial identificatory link between the news and interviewees' own lives:

Tina: I like the fact that they also report about ordinary people as well... sometimes we find people with similar problems to ours. It's not just about the famous people. So, at least we can feel that they also come down to our own level...

Khaya: ...it promotes reading of news by the poor.

Tendai: ...those other newspapers, the thing is, they sort of represent the elite...

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Tendai: I mean, they mostly report on what's happening to those high profiled people. Like, how many companies he now has; like, he has bought some shares in whatever company. Except those days when they also reported the xenophobic attacks...

Although the tabloid's attention to 'ordinary people' was revealed, for the interviewees, it was related to the notion of a particularly proletarian forum, unavailable elsewhere in the press:

Ayanda: In the case of *Daily Sun*, I have viewed it as representing the African side of reality, where they cover a whole lot of things that happen in African societies, that would be frowned on as witch craft and so on... In the interest of a full representation of reality, I think *Daily Sun* is doing a good job because the scary stories would go untold by the mainstream media ...tabloids can afford to cover the ordinary.

In contrast to her comment above, in an individual in depth interview, Ayanda also commented on the negative aspect of the *Daily Sun*, pointing to the ways in which it perpetuated negative images about the South African society:

Ayanda: ... reflecting the South African society in a bad light in that it is always covering the bad side of our traditions, rarely having a positive side of the African traditions. For example, the only time I read about circumcision in the paper has been when some young men died, but never about the important impact reflected after the young men come back from the bush/mountain because that tradition does play an integral role in the lives of the South African society. It is a special way of initiating them to adulthood that fosters perseverance,

leadership and a spirit of togetherness... ever observed how these young men from the bush maintain strong relations amongst themselves when they get back from the mountain?

Nonetheless, the *Daily Sun* was considered the only paper that reflected particular experiences of its readers. Given this, it may be argued that tabloids help to constitute a working class public forum, paralleling the bourgeois public forum constituted by the mainstream ‘quality’ press. In this study, the experience of tabloids as an alternative forum for ordinary people came to the fore in the discussion with readers from diverse backgrounds. Thabani, a taxi driver, explained how he perceived the *Daily Sun* as taking political action on behalf of ordinary people, for example in relation to local authorities:

Thabani: ... most people having problems with their municipalities about social amenities phone this paper. And, the *Daily Sun* puts it on the front page...they want them to take action. At the end, they can make a difference.

Tina: Yeah, even those who have problems with the Home Affairs department, they go to the *Daily Sun*...in a few days, ‘now I have my I.D’, or ‘now I can access the social grant’... it’s the ‘*Sun Power*’, yeah. It’s really helping the disadvantaged people of our communities.

As this discussion draws on common ideas of the media as a fourth estate, scrutinising authorities and taking action on behalf of citizens, it is clear that it is the *Daily Sun*, as opposed to the ‘quality’ press, that is understood as taking up this role. In South Africa, coping with the demands of life might begin with something as essential as having an identity document. This document is a precondition for seeking employment, education, voting and claiming social grants. Due to bureaucratic ineffectiveness, unprofessional and lack of resources, the department of Home Affairs has become infamous for its incapacity to provide people with identity documents (Wasserman, 2008: 18). The struggles encountered by people in this regard have become a daily feature in the *Daily Sun*. In a daily column titled “Home Affairs Horrors,” readers’ dilemma to get identity documents is reported. As highlighted above, Thabani perceived these stories in terms of civic intervention.

In other words, the *Daily Sun* mediates between people and the government. With its focus on social delivery issues and the relationship of trust that it has established with its readers, it has created a platform where readers can express their feelings of marginalisation. For Wasserman, this campaign has high symbolic value as it insists on the acknowledgement of the *Daily Sun* readers' status as citizens: people that have names, faces, and a birthright to membership of the civic community (Wasserman, 2008: 18). That these identities are individual rather than group identities, is perhaps no coincidence in the light of the fact that the tabloid addresses its readers in terms of a neo-liberal politics of consumerism and individual rights, rather than in the language of social justice and communal redress (Wasserman, 2008: 18). Being constructed in this way as citizens, tabloid readers may now be in a position to challenge authority and lay claim to their democratic rights.

Apart from the 'fourth estate' role of the *Daily Sun*, many participants in all the focus groups expressed their enjoyment of 'human interest' stories about strange phenomena. They confirmed that the content of the *Daily Sun* reinforces their already-existing beliefs about different kinds of issues like witchcraft and other kinds of supernatural phenomena. For them, such 'sensational' and 'bizarre' stories constitute real experiences in their daily lives:

Interviewer: So, seeing and reading such stories, do you find them relating in any way, to your day-to day experiences?

Innocent: ... we live in African communities. These things happen in our communities. ... most of us know about the African magic.

Interviewer: (*interrupting*) African magic?

Innocent: Yes, it happens, and we are forced to believe these things because we hear about them almost every day...

Interviewer: You mean, you are forced to believe?

Johnson: Yeah... it's all about magic...like he said, we are forced to believe, and it's the society we live in that has reinforced our beliefs...

Lindani: Mm...mm, we are Africans...And it works for some people. I mean those who believe in those things. A sangoma tells you to rape a virgin in order to cure your HIV and AIDS, and they do that...

- Naledi:** ... these days, we are reading about young girls becoming *sangomas* (traditional healers), not because they want, but because they are being 'called'. If they do not respond to those calls, their lives and families will be threatened because they will be going against the wills of their ancestors.
- Lukhanyo:** Yeah, whenever people are being cursed by *amatokoloshe*, it means they have done something wrong. And, usually, they know where they went wrong...
- Ben:** ... we know these things even from our home country [he is from Ghana].
- Siphon:** ... I attended a funeral in Peddie last year. When we took the coffin to the graveyard, just before putting it down in the grave, the top of the coffin, the lid I mean, just dropped down on its own... In our culture, if something like that happens, we believe that the deceased is angry with someone amongst the mourners. ...that person would be having something to do with the death of the person.
- Interviewer:** And what happened from there?
- Siphon:** People started asking, '*ngubani lomun'tu?* (Who is that person?) (*Laughter*). ... So you know, these things happen.
- Lukhanyo:** ... and when we read about them in the newspapers, we are not shocked because they are some things that we witness in our communities. We see them happening right amongst ourselves, even in my own family it happened.

From the above comments, it is evident that the *Daily Sun* "mirrors" the readers' personal lived-circumstances, highlighting one of the reasons for its attraction. Most of the interviewees did not express distrust in the mysterious occurrences covered in the paper. Rather, the stories were seen as part of their culture and so when they read about the stories in the tabloid, they are not 'news' at all because the things reported in the tabloid are the things they experience in their day to day lives.

Political significance of reading the *Daily Sun*

Another reason the *Daily Sun* is preferred by its readers is its unique approach to politics. It escapes from the in-depth framework which is characteristic of the mainstream press, through covering little or no politics at all in its pages. Of the publications studied, there were few 'political' stories: '*Mbeki told: Step down!*' (4

June 2008), ‘*Ministers discuss SABC*’ (4 June 2008), ‘*Four Labour officials suspended*’ (2 November 2007), ‘*Zuma feels unfairly treated!*’ (5 August 2008). Little coverage of political news by the *Daily Sun* has influenced its popularity amongst the ordinary people who seem to ‘ignore’ political news and prefer stories that directly affect them. Except for readers like Sam from the male focus group, the majority of the interviewees showed no interest in political news. The tabloid preference for what can be called the “politics of the everyday” can best be realised in the way in which the *Daily Sun* is compared to the formal political news of the mainstream media by interviewees from all the focus groups:

Interviewer: Ok, looking at the *Daily Sun*, what can you say about its coverage of politics?

Thembie: ... I think it (the *Daily Sun*) refuses to hold fixed sets of political positions. I mean, they are not politically aligned. At the same time, the mainstream newspapers are often indebted to party political positions.

Siphon: ... there is no politics in this paper. Very little to talk about. We discuss politics from anywhere. Political news is reported on eTV, yeah, not this paper.

Ben: It’s very slim. I mean, they just scratch the surface. It lacks detail. That’s why he (Sam) buys the *Mail and Guardian* or *Sunday Times*.

Mandla: The *Daily Sun*, I don’t think it’s a political paper. It’s more of a social paper. I mean, it’s sort of focused on reporting those issues that are outside politics...

Thandi: ...it doesn’t tell everything, but it tries to give some bits and pieces of some activities happening in these political parties...I don’t think that is its focus. Politics is found in the *Sunday Times*, yeah, that one.

Martin: ... who in Mdantsane can go out and buy it (the *Sunday Times*). Really, the *Daily Sun* would be more relevant to him (the person living in Mdantsane) than the Obama, Motlanthe and Lekota stories (*laughter*). .. We prefer this paper because there are (sic) no hard political news and stuff like that.

Ayanda: ... it has little political influence, mark my words, little not none, little political influence...

Martin’s comment reveals how some readers feel alienated from mainstream politics. Ironically, cultural studies approaches to journalism have advocated for the concept of “media citizenship” that aims to untie the division between the “knowledge class” and ordinary people by focusing on people’s relationship to media rather than to

conventional knowledge production (see Hermes, 2006:33; Hartley, 1998:58-59). The divide between the daily lives of tabloid readers and mainstream discourses of politics and culture explains the popular demand for tabloids (see Fiske, 1989). This disjuncture results in a pleasant skepticism which further serves to include the formerly dominated in a public contestation over meaning, thus Fiske comments:

One of its most characteristic tones of voice is that of a skeptical laughter which offers the pleasures of disbelief, the pleasures of not being taken in. This popular pleasure of ‘seeing through’ them (the powerful) is the historical result of centuries of subordination which the people have not allowed to develop into subjection. (1991:48)

Although the extent to which tabloids provide information essential for readers to participate in active citizenship has been debated, tabloids could be seen as “one of the ways that the news can be rescued from irrelevance to the lives of the mass of people who would otherwise reject it entirely” (Sparks, 2000:9; Gripsrud, 2000: 287). For the majority of South Africans the socio-economic rights that citizens in a democracy are entitled to, have not materialised (Robins, 2005:2). These include rights to food, water, housing and basic health care. For these ordinary people, whom Wasserman refers to as “people who are still not in count” (Wasserman, 2008: 12), the *Daily Sun* seems to provide a recourse to a medium that seems to listen to them and take them seriously, thus including them in a mediated public sphere from which they have been excluded. Looking at the *Daily Sun* from this point of view, one can argue that more news platforms and more channels of opinion could be a positive move for the democracy of South Africa. Nevertheless, only from a liberal-pluralist perspective would the creation of more media outlets contribute to a diversity of voices and an intensification of democratic debate (Wasserman, 2008: 12). A critical perspective would question how these new voices would contribute to democratic politics, given a media landscape shaped by uneven power relations which appear to eschew formal political news.

The discussions revealed interviewees’ distrust for political institutions and governments. Statements like ‘politicians are liars’ or ‘they spend lots of government monies’ from both the student as well as the male focus groups highlighted their

suspicion of political representatives. By publishing stories which expose political representatives' misuse or abuse of power, the *Daily Sun* plays the role of watchdog usually associated with normative (mainstream) journalism in the liberal democratic tradition. But one of the differences in their approaches is that the *Daily Sun's* discourse is usually directed at the person, and the perspective from which authorities are perceived, is that of people who feel estranged from political processes (Wasserman, 2008: 17). This perspective enables tabloid audiences to connect with issues that are deeply political, but not framed in the way political stories about the powerful are usually presented (Gripsrud, 2000: 299).

By engaging with such stories involving the powerful, it can be argued that tabloids appear to allow for an element of resistance against what is seen as the all-pervasive power of government (Bird, 1992: 131). This can be achieved through bringing to light in sensational ways issues that appeal to the emotions and that directly affect readers' lives. In this way, tabloid readers can at least direct their anger at the bureaucracy that fails them. It can also be further argued that texts dealing with personal problems can create among readers a sense of proximity to their own lives and experiences. They are in fact important forms of knowledge, engaging audiences who might feel alienated by the more abstract forms that serious journalism represents. Taking the view that political participation does not only build on rational processing of information but also on emotions, it can thus be argued that tabloids like the *Daily Sun* have the potential to provide this platform (see Ornebring & Jonsson, 2004).

The issue of how tabloids engage with political news directs us to a further key criticism of tabloid reading. Previous studies of tabloid newspaper reading found that tabloid readers are 'apolitical', and assumed that readers are uninterested in public affairs in general (see Pursehouse, 1992; Rooney, 2000). This was also evident in my study. In almost all the focus groups, participants mostly expressed their reading of the *Daily Sun* as part of a detachment from the abstract current affairs news, which they perceived as having little relevance to their lives: political news generally

emerged as a less favoured part of the content, and was only discussed after further prompting.

Naledi: I mean ...we are not interested about business news because we are not in the business venture. We are not interested about what's going on in Iraq or whatever. We want those things around us...

Sizani: ... The other papers [the broadsheets] are too big and have lots of things about big people, business...

Their emphasis on the separation of 'day-to-day things' and more abstract social issues could be interpreted as sustaining the notion of tabloids as nurturing a distancing from the wider structures [including politics] governing society. As opposed to news about celebrities and sport, stories about political decisions and events seemed to be less remembered or talked about. In probing the participants about what they thought of 'political news' in the paper, most of them became hesitant to speak, breaking their speech with pauses and indecision. The difficulty in talking about these political stories could be explained by the more conventional style of the writing (of political news), as opposed to the more easily absorbed narrative qualities of tabloid stories. (see Connell, 1998, for different types of tabloid reporting). It could also be linked to the perception amongst some participants that politics was too controversial to discuss in public. Discussing political news was described as confined to more private communicative spaces.

The female focus group comprised middle-aged women who do menial jobs for survival. These women were vocal about their dread of politics. For many of them, 'politics' was a difficult subject to talk about:

Thandi: ... I don't like politics. I can't even follow what's happening in that thing. Unless they are maybe election results, yeah, I am interested in knowing who has won or who has rigged the elections, like Mugabe (*laughter*). Otherwise, I stay away from politics...That's why we don't read these other papers that sort of talk about politics through and through.

Tendai: To be honest, I don't... really take much notice of it...I haven't really got much to say about it. Plus... I am Zimbabwean, and in Zimbabwe, you don't just open your mouth and speak politics. Or by the end of the

day you'll see yourself in prison...You don't speak politics like you speak of anything else...

Tina: ... the *Daily Sun* is fine. I am not a political person too, I don't like politics, but my husband is very active politically... it's better I buy the *Daily Sun* and read stories that make me laugh with my daughter, than listening to Jacob Zuma singing 'Mshini wam mshini wam' on TV, listening to Lekota and Shilowa forming a new party...

The 'disinterest' here appears to be related to a view of politics as out of reach of one's competencies, as way above one's head. Such a lack of confidence in the ability to understand political processes can be seen in relation to the readers' position in some kind of underclass that perceives itself as unable to do anything significant about events in mainstream politics (Johansson, 2007: 188). It may also imply the fact that tabloids set up a more horizontal relationship between themselves and their readers, creating an intimacy or rapport with their readers through human interest stories. This contrasts with the formal voice of mainstream newspapers which address readers from the point of view of one who knows, giving information to those who do not (see Fiske, 1992). Drawing from the above, it is clear that lack of interest in political issues especially amongst the women interviewees, is a key influence in newspaper preferences and reading habits. Thus, the mainstream media are perceived with lack of interest. What was notable was that the interviewees' conscious and selective consumption of the print media is structured by their identity and relationship to the broader political formation. They are 'unified' by their skepticism towards sections of the mainstream press as news sources and their resolve to selectively consume newspapers (Mabweazara, 2006: 84).

In spite of the negative attitudes to 'politics', both male and female interviewees expressed an eagerness to get an overview of the daily round-up of current affairs – to 'know what's going on'. Reading the *Daily Sun* was therefore seen as a credible way to keep informed and up to date with the news agendas of the day, and as a supplement to broadcast news. However, as questions of 'political news' caused the kinds of distancing and disinterested reactions described above, my observation was not that political issues were uninteresting to the interviewees. In fact, especially among the male interviewees, when topics such as the xenophobic attacks and the

tactics of politicians were talked about, they caused animated discussions, which in some cases went on after the interviews had ended. Such a finding was found in Eliasoph's (1998) study on how political talk was produced in everyday life. In her study, respondents showed an unwillingness to discuss political issues in public, but opened up in more private contexts. This affirms that 'anti-politics' is a dominant attitude even though individuals may have political concerns.

Political disengagement, according to Eliasoph, is not any more natural than involvement, and the active 'avoidance' of politics can instead be seen as a result of a lack of available meaning systems that can connect the individual concerns with wider politics (Eliasoph, 1998: 230). It is further argued that there is over-whelming evidence of ignorance about politics (Eliasoph, 1998: 230). Studies have shown that being interviewed can make interviewees into thoughtful citizens: the interviews opened up free, unjudgemental space for talking through vague political ideas, playing their ideas in the light of the day (Eliasoph, 1998: 231). Thus, it is possible to read the participants' responses in this light, where an avoidance of 'politics' as a subject may not necessarily be a sign of political indifference or an 'apolitical' existence, but a result of opinions on this subject as out of reach of one's own ability to connect to it (Eliasoph, 1998: 231). As highlighted in the earlier chapters, it can be argued that tabloid news has the potential both to contribute to such a disconnection, and to facilitate insights through its lively tabloid style. For instance, during times of controversial current affairs issues, the interest in the news could turn into a desire for information. Thus, tabloids could clearly be used as resources for political learning, although often through a 'tabloidised' perspective (Eliasoph, 1998: 231).

Nonetheless, given the limitations inherent in the discourses of tabloids and in this case, the *Daily Sun*, there is reasonable ground to argue that it comes up short if the goal is providing critical information about the political public sphere that its readers need to make political decisions. Thus, Sparks notes:

While popular journalism would speak in an idiom recognisable by the masses as more or less related to their own, it would only speak of their concerns, joys

and discontents within the limit set for it by existing structures of society. (1992: 28)

This does not, however, mean that the *Daily Sun* has little or nothing to contribute in the lives of its readers. Rather, there is need to broaden the notion of what ‘politics’ means, and to embrace participation outside the arenas of traditional politics in keeping with the revised conception of the public sphere discussed in the first chapter (Sparks, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Ornebring and Jonsson, 2004). In this view, more contemporary models of the public sphere characterised by smallness of scale and composed of small interest groups are accommodated. The debates from these small public spheres can then channel into the larger mainstream public spheres (Mabweazara, 2006: 89). This fact leads to the importance of tabloids as alternative public spheres catering for specific groups located on the margins of mainstream public life (see Fraser, 1992). It can thus be argued that the *Daily Sun* is giving new opportunities for representation and recognition for groups outside the mainstream, potentially creating an alternative public sphere. This view assumes that tabloid journalism has positioned itself in different ways as an alternative to the issues, forms and audiences of the journalistic mainstream. In that case, the emancipatory potential of the *Daily Sun* as argued by the interviewees, lies in the fact that it addresses issues previously not open to public debate, such as witchcraft. These issues are ‘political’ in ways that resonate with the lived circumstances of the interviewees. In this way, the *Daily Sun* challenges the structural elitism of the mainstream press by providing representations that resonate with the readers’ lived experiences. This confirms the assertion that public spheres are not only arenas for discursive opinions. Rather, they are also arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities (Fraser, 1992: 124).

The political significance of reading the *Daily Sun* cannot be concluded without making reference to a different kind of political reading which emanated from the interviewees. This kind of reading exists within critical theory’s perception of tabloids as negatively affecting society. From a mixed group of male and female interviewees,

it transpired that the *Daily Sun* can be read as a kind of ‘self-conscious’ joke that does not make them think critically about their situation:

Interviewer: So you mean the *Daily Sun* is not a serious newspaper?

Tina: ... honestly, do you think it’s serious when they dig for such stories? Where do they find such stories? ... when we read it it’s not like we don’t see that this paper is not serious, but maybe it’s because it’s the kind of news that we look for so that at least we can find something to talk about as families or friends...Otherwise, personally I know something is wrong with the *Daily Sun* reporters or the editor I think.

Sizani: ...Any normal person can tell that something is wrong with this man (who claimed to have gone to heaven and came back to tell the *Daily Sun* about it) or maybe the reporters, we can say maybe the story was just made up, who knows...

The reading highlighted above makes debatable the view that while tabloids undoubtedly rest upon the mobilisation and organisation of the concerns of the people, they do so in ways that prevent them from becoming aware of their status (Sparks, 1992: 42). This correlates with Fiske’s (1992) argument that tabloid journalism works against producing a ‘believing subject’ (Fiske, 1992: 49).

Drawing from Tina’s comments above about how she argues with her family members concerning some of the stories, it is noteworthy that some of the interviewees read the paper with their families or colleagues, drawing parallel examples from real life experiences. This shows that the interviewees do not just read the content and forget about it while waiting for the next issue. In fact, they also reflect on the content: they are not passive receivers of the content. It also highlights the view that media messages are normally discussed by individuals during reception and are consequently elaborated and shared amongst individuals who may or may not have been involved in the initial process of reception (Thompson, 1995: 43). At this point of reception, individuals’ understanding of the messages may also be changed since the messages are viewed from varying perspectives, subjected to the comments and criticisms of others and thus slowly woven into the symbolic material of the readers’ daily lives (Thompson, 1995: 43). The implication is therefore that media messages can be communicated further than the initial context of reception and

altered through an ongoing process of analysis and reinterpretation. This process may occur in varied circumstances and may involve a variety of participants (Thompson, 1995: 43).

There are also grounds to extend the parameters of what constitutes political knowledge. For example, entertainment has been understood to be closely related to political engagement (Garnham, 1992: 374). From this point of view, the ‘non-political’ (in this case, entertainment) must be regarded as essential to the analysis of the media as political communication (Garnham, 1992: 374). There are also two ways in which the ‘entertainment’ side of tabloid material adds to perceptions and identities which have a bearing on public life on the whole. To begin with, such material can connect with views on the world and the individual’s position in this, which in some way impacts on political action or non-action as much as news about public affairs (Gripsrud, 1992; Langer, 1998). The point here is to show how the reading relates to life views and expectancies, and is relevant to consider in terms of wider public life.

For example, the extracts below show how something as commonly loved as horoscope reading support the above sentiments. These responses came from Lyn and Naledi, from the student and women focus groups respectively:

Lyn: I love the horoscopes, it’s like the ‘daily prophet’. At least I get an idea of what to expect or what could happen to me, whether its good or bad. Then at least I get myself ready...

Naledi: ...You see the horoscopes, they just work in the same way like *inyanga* (the witchdoctors), telling you your lucky days, the problems that you may face and at times how to deal with them. I trust them, they are helpful and I find them working...

Secondly, the ‘non-political’ stories and features can equally be seen as having their own place in the public sphere discourse, as their reception shows that they can be used to deal with issues of direct relevance to social debate. Celebrity stories, as discussed previously, present opportunities to debate social norms concerning morality and infidelity. They also contain elements of criticism of social privilege that

were appreciated by interviewees. ‘Personality politics’ of this kind are not essentially progressive, as using celebrity stories to channel social frustration can work against actual involvement in social change, even though it might nurture a critical stance towards privilege (Buckingham, 1997: 358).

Therefore, it is important to regard tabloid content as contributing to viewpoints of relevance to the public sphere. As evident in the previous chapter, I noted that interviewees perceived non-political content that aims to educate, such as advice on lifestyle, health, finance, and relationships, as an area where the newspaper fulfills an important role in society, through helping with different aspects of being a member of this. This ‘service journalism’ described earlier in the chapter, while addressing audiences partly as consumers and partly as citizens, ‘is amenable to politicisation’ as it ‘politicises the problems of everyday life’ (Eide & Knight, 1999: 525).

In view of the above discussion, it would not be enough to argue that tabloids do not burden their readers with “heavy politics”. Taking a closer look at the content of the *Daily Sun*, it becomes clear that not only does it cover “politics of the everyday” and attack those in the high positions, it also gives substantial coverage of formal political processes, though in ‘brief’. But the link between tabloid reading and political knowledge is far from clear-cut (Johansson, 2007: 190). Readers can and do use tabloid papers to increase their knowledge about issues, and the competencies needed for participation in the public sphere. Thus, to gain a more inclusive appreciation of the roles of tabloids to public life, the focus could be switched from political knowledge-bases and frameworks, to the communicative and participatory elements of the reading. This might show the potential of tabloid journalism in creating alternative communicative forums as well as its ability to make news ‘come alive’ to a wide range of people (see Johansson, 2007).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how the participants appropriate the meanings they derive from the paper into their everyday lived realities. Although the *Daily Sun* is a mainstream news paper in terms of its circulation, and occupies a central place in South African popular culture, its reception is framed by its readers' alienation from mainstream political processes. Instead of invoking an image of tabloid reading as a product of a 'free' choice from a range of media, simply representing 'what readers want', a major finding of this research is instead how social structures impact on reading choices and experiences. The social context of the readers thus becomes a critical issue to consider in understanding tabloid reading. Importantly, I realised how the readers were careful to detach themselves from the newspaper's material. This indicates how negative perceptions of the newspaper in other public places had filtered through to readers, as well as how the tabloid style had led to a particularly distanced way of describing their association with the paper. Despite the detachment from the paper, brand identification with the *Daily Sun* was strong, especially evident in comparisons with other newspapers. The interviewees perceived the *Daily Sun* as "affordable" and telling stories about ordinary people, while perceiving other newspapers as boring and lengthy.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study has investigated tabloid journalism from an audience perspective, presenting findings that dispute as well as complement theories about its role in society. In this concluding chapter, I present the key findings of the research. These are analysed in relation to different methodological and theoretical perspectives explained in the previous chapters. Lastly, I discuss the possibilities for further research.

Findings

From the group of readers who participated in the research, marginalisation was in fact a central theme to the interpretation of the reading of the *Daily Sun*. Although the *Daily Sun* is a mainstream news discourse in terms of its circulation, and occupies a central place in South African popular culture, its reception was framed by distancing from other kinds of newspapers and from major social and political institutions. Instead of conjuring up an image of tabloid reading as a product of a ‘free’ choice from a variety of media, merely representing ‘what readers want’, a key finding of this research was instead how social structures impact on reading choices and experiences. The social context of the readers becomes an essential factor to consider in comprehending tabloid reading. Within this principle, however, the analysis has highlighted additional insights into the roles played by the *Daily Sun* in particular.

The research showed how some of the readers of the *Daily Sun* fitted their newspaper into a range of interconnected news sources, in particular other tabloids, broadsheets as well as broadcast news. Within this media landscape, everyday habits and routines paved the way for making sense of the *Daily Sun*. Essentially, for student and male

participants, appreciated elements to this habit was the use of the tabloid as a ‘talking-point’ as well as a ‘flick-through’ engagement, which allowed the paper to fit into to daily life.

I also found that reading the *Daily Sun* is also a highly public practice, for example taking place in the taxis while commuting, at work as well as at home. However, some important variations surrounding the reading of the *Daily Sun* were also revealed. The main noticeable difference amongst the participants was to do with how they portrayed themselves in relation to the paper. As stated previously in Chapter 5, participants from the student, male and a few from the female focus groups attempted to distance themselves from the newspaper. For example, they described tabloids including the *Daily Sun* as ‘non-serious’ that were taken ‘with a pinch of salt’. Interestingly, I noted that age and type of occupation appeared to determine the degree of effort put into such denouncements. While the older participants from the female focus group openly showed affinity to their preferred tabloid and making positive comparisons to other papers, younger participants especially from the student focus group were more guarded in their attitudes. They were more likely to show apparent unease, lamenting the *Daily Sun* and other tabloids for not being ‘proper’ newspapers, and, while admitting to reading the tabloid more often, were especially brave in disapproving their connection to them.

This might indicate how negative perceptions of the newspaper in other public arenas had filtered through to readers, as well as how the light-hearted tabloid style had led to a particularly distanced way of describing one’s involvement with the paper. Perceptions of a typical reader as ‘uneducated’ were prevalent among student participants – but this detachment was complicated by the fact that there was a concurrent observation of the *Daily Sun* as written for ‘the ordinary man’, and identification with that ‘ordinary man’ as ‘us’. However, despite the presentation of oneself as distanced, brand identification with the paper was strong, especially evident in comparisons to other newspapers. Participants for instance, perceived some broadsheets like the *Sunday Times* as ‘too serious’.

Though a distanced outlook on the tabloid framed the reading, then, it was not a sign of its irrelevance to the interviewees. Main attractions of the paper were the typically ‘soft’ tabloid focuses, such as human interest, sport, horoscopes and celebrity stories. On one side, the enjoyment of this type of content was a means to deal with everyday struggles, where the tabloid, particularly through its use of humour, presented an opportunity for relaxation and the release of general everyday anxieties. On the other, the newspaper also seems to present a vent for frustration entrenched in experiences of social inequality. This may mean that an equally important part of the appeal can be the ability to ‘attack’ and criticise social privilege within the reading experience. This use was particularly evident in responses to celebrity stories.

The research has also highlighted that tabloid reading can also be analysed in relation to politics and public life. In the previous chapters, I reported on how distancing from mainstream politics and distrust in politicians appeared to be linked to the reading of the *Daily Sun*. For some, the *Daily Sun* was perceived as the only accessible forum for current affairs analysis, and was understood as helping to clarify complex issues. The social interaction around, and participatory nature of the reading of the *Daily Sun* further point to the potential of popular journalism in encouraging participation in a public forum. The paper does provide access to a news forum and, publicly read and debated, it can connect certain social groups to information about public affairs. But in this study, it was only in the discussions with male interviewees that such participation had taken a more openly political form. In discussing the more progressive aspects of the *Daily Sun*’s reporting of politics, I argued against the common description of tabloid readers as ‘apolitical’. This argument was based both on the grounds of how responses to content outside of traditional public affairs can be seen as having a bearing on political processes, and of how I observed a political interest in the interviews.

Looking at participants’ responses from a gender perspective, complex identity positions were evident too. There were similarities between male and female

participants in terms of reading modes, perceptions and overall uses of the newspaper, but also some notable differences. To some extent, male and female participants appreciated different parts of the content, with male participants mostly preferring the sports pages whilst female participants stating a preference for celebrity news and gossip. Certainly, some female interviewees thought of the sport as exclusively aimed at men. The perception of the sports coverage as aimed at men was not surprising, given that sport is a key representation of masculinity in many societies. One of the pleasures implicated in the enjoyment of the sports coverage for the male participants seemed to be the chance to take part in a ‘masculine’ activity, and to share this experience with other men.

Future Research

The study has highlighted some key areas of concern for further research. Knowing much about the roles and uses of tabloid newspapers in general is significant for further research, especially as newspapers in general are currently facing a period of dramatic change (see Wasserman, 2006). Newspapers have often been studied solely for their role as news providers, but as evidenced by the findings of this study, it has become obvious that the reading of a newspaper comprises much more than getting updated on what goes on in the world. This implies that more wide-ranging research might also be able to take into account how the use of the *Daily Sun* and other media products interrelate to produce knowledge and understanding drawn from the social world. Equally, the way the *Daily Sun* connects to other parts of popular culture, such as magazines, reality television shows and soap operas would contribute to a better understanding of the ‘circuit’ of popular culture on a reception level (Johansson, 2007: 194).

The focus of this study has been on the responses of a selection of readers to the stories appearing in the *Daily Sun*. The production of these texts has been ignored. This suggests that an investigation into the production of the *Daily Sun*, looking into the work of journalists and production teams in putting together the newspaper, would be appreciated in conjunction with a readership study like mine. In other words,

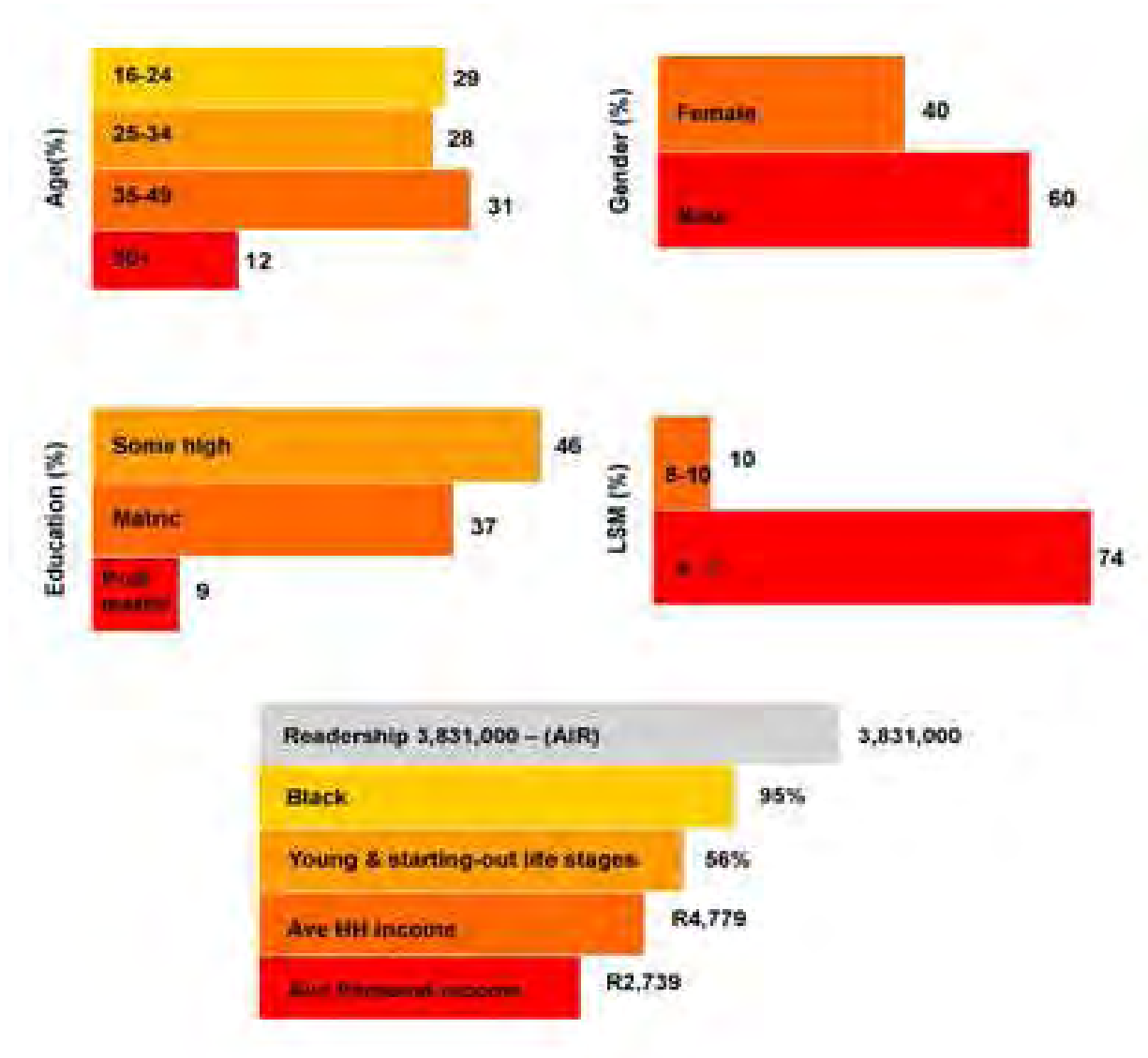
comparing journalists' perceptions of their readers, with the readers' views about those who provide their reading material, could shed light on an intimate and yet highly institutionalised relationship of which there is little public knowledge (see Bird, 1992).

Finally, comparative research investigating the role of tabloid journalism in diverse national contexts would be necessary. This research has provided insights into the important place occupied by the *Daily Sun* in South African popular culture. I have learned from South African tabloid readers not only their views about a particular newspaper, but also about their everyday lives and about the national culture which shapes their interaction with the paper. Cross-cultural research might potentially provide wide-ranging insights into how a broader social environment lays the basis for media use. How, for instance, do tabloid newspapers function in Swaziland, Lesotho or Uganda, where they are similarly debated, but take a different form. A comparative research project could assist in branching out from a 'media-centric' viewpoint, to looking at how other social factors in different cultural settings shape local responses.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Daily Sun Readers: Demographic Profile



Source: AMPS 06A

Appendix 2

Daily Sun Readers: Current Research

Regular Reader Profile

4.8M regular readers i.e. 3 times per week or more
96% has a regular source of monthly income*
13.7% unemployed and looking for work*
50% have matric or higher educational qualification, including 11% with a post-matric qualification
28% have a household income of R6,000 per month or more*
2/3s readers like to read for pleasure*
Generally one (53%) or two (37%) income earners per household

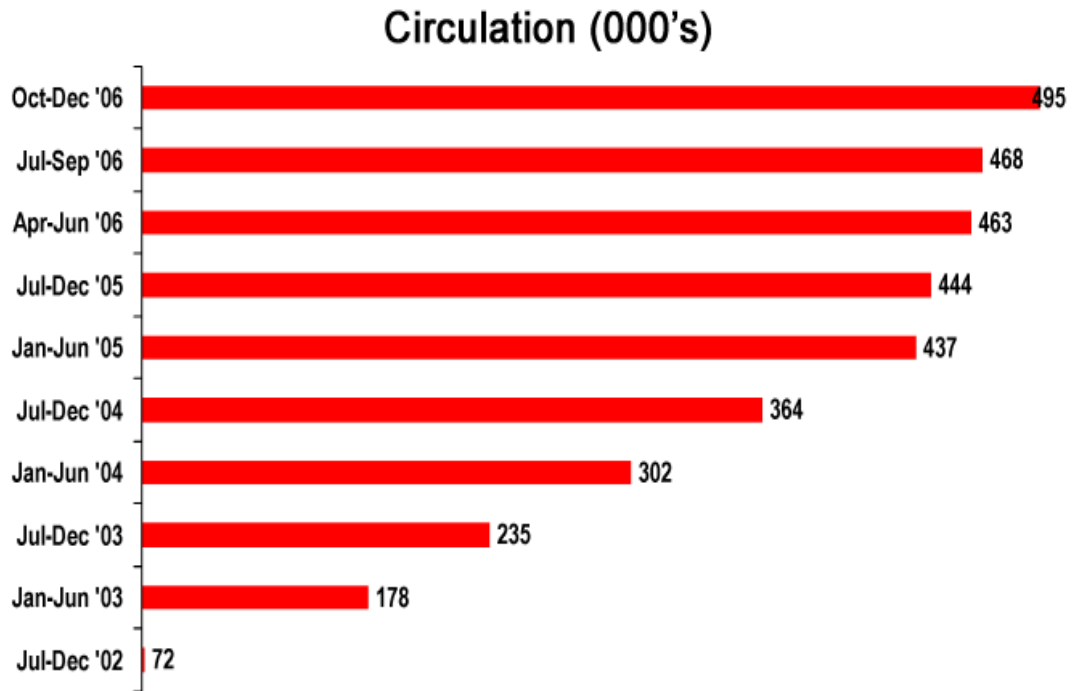
Reader Experience (regular readers)

72% buy their own copy
51% of readers read it in one go and 49% go back to it later*
Half of those who go back later, read it twice*
More than 62% read from cover to cover*
86% of regular readers strongly agree that *Daily Sun* offers value for money*
30% claim to cut out parts of the newspaper*
These are mostly educational, informative or historic in nature*
61% find all types of advertising useful*
35% often use *Daily Sun* to help plan their shopping and 45%* sometimes
94% of respondents can't do without *Daily Sun**

Source: http://www.dailysun.co.za/or_currentResearch.aspx

Appendix 3

Daily Sun: Circulation Trend



Source: ABC 2006 Oct

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Introduction

Introduction and explanation of the project. Reassurance of confidentiality.

Warm-up round of introductions.

A. Frequency and importance of media (newspaper) consumption

- ☞ What are your newspaper preferences and why?
- ☞ Which other forms of media (besides newspapers) do you consume?

B. Reading of the *Daily Sun*

- ☞ How often do you read the *Daily Sun*?
- ☞ Do you read other tabloids as well? Which ones?
- ☞ How would you compare the *Daily Sun* to other newspapers?

Prompt: How do you think it's different or similar – for example to the *Daily Dispatch* or the *Mail and Guardian*? Or to papers like the *Sunday Times*?

C. Content, Language, Style vs. consumption of the *Daily Sun*

- ☞ What would you say it is about the *Daily Sun* that makes you/other people want to read it?

Prompt: What do you like about the newspaper?

- ☞ Are there any parts that you particularly like? Why do you like ...?
- ☞ Is there anything you dislike?
- ☞ How would you describe the style of the *Daily Sun*?

Prompt: What do you think about the way it looks, e.g. layout, use of pictures/colours?

- ☞ What would you say about the kind of language it uses?
- ☞ What is your overall view of the *Daily Sun* as a tabloid?

D. Readers' lived experience vs. content appreciation of the *Daily Sun*

- ☞ Do you consume the same print media as you friends/relatives?
- ☞ Do you discuss or share the content of the stories with colleagues or family members?
- ☞ If yes on the above question, when? Where?
- ☞ Does your reading of the *Daily Sun* play a role in shaping the way you relate to each other?

☞ Do you find the stories of any importance in terms of informing you on specific issues that relate to your day-to-day experiences?

☞ Do you find the stories connecting with other aspects of your preferences and pleasures?

☞ What do you think about the paper's coverage of celebrities?

Prompt: Are there any celebrity stories that you particularly liked / disliked?

(Alternatively bring up a story myself)

☞ What was it about ... that you liked / disliked?

☞ How do you feel when you read stories like...?

☞ Do you think stories about celebrities relate to you in any way?

E. Pricing of the Daily Sun

☞ If the price of the *Daily Sun* were to be like that of other newspapers like the *Sunday Times*, would you still buy it?

F. The political significance of the reading of the Daily Sun

☞ Thinking about the *Daily Sun*'s reporting of politics, how would you describe this?

Prompt: Do you remember a political story you've read recently? (Alternatively bring up a story myself, or start with the story)

☞ What did you think about the way the paper reported on ... (said story)? Do you feel that the news about politics and politicians in the *Daily Sun* contributes to what you think about certain parties or politicians? In which ways?

☞ Do you believe the stories you read in the *Daily Sun*? Which ones don't you believe?

Prompt: Are there any kinds of stories, or a particular journalist, that you find more trustworthy?

Is there anything you've read that you didn't believe?

➤Whom do you think the *Daily Sun* is aimed at?

➤Are there parts of the paper that seems aimed at women or men in particular? What do you think about the way that women and men are shown overall in the paper?

➤Finally, is there anything that you would like to bring up that we haven't mentioned?

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