



This paper is taken from

*A Europe of Many Cultures
Proceedings of the fifth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2003

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 369 7

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Gocsál, Á. and Huszár, Á. (2003) Values in advertisements for children, in Ross, A. (ed) A Europe of Many Cultures. London: CiCe, pp 259 – 262

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of DGXXII for their support and encouragement.

Values in advertisements for children

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In Hungary, as with the other post-communist countries in the region, a consumer society has developed only in the last decade. The development of a 'consumption aspect' had been hampered partly because of the ascetic and puritan character of the dominant ideology, and partly because of the 'shortage economy' resulting from the previous planned-controlled economy, and under which certain behavioural forms and patterns relating to consumerism were condemned or even penalised. A profound change has taken place in Hungary over the past fourteen years in both leisure activities and consumption.

In common with most other countries, Hungarian habits of television viewing have also changed. A survey from 1993 reported that Hungarian children and teenagers spent about two to three hours watching television each day. This is similar to the average value found in the US, Canada and the UK (Kósa–Vajda 1998:20). Since 1993 several new commercial channels have been launched in Hungary and cable networks have also developed significantly. These use new techniques to involve viewers, such as 'phone polls which offer awards. Sociological surveys researching the television-watching habits of different societal groups suggest that those with lower salaries and education spend most time watching television. Unemployment also occurs most frequently in those groups, so for them television is the main, possibly the only source of amusement. The socialisation of children brought up in such families is highly influenced by the more or less overt messages conveyed by television programmes and advertisements. The annual 'advertisement consumption' of a child brought up in a television-addicted family is close to the value of 20,000 which was found in the US (Kósa–Vajda 1998:60).

Advertisements belong to the group of programmes that, as George Gerbner says,

tell us what to do. They are about values and choices. They show us certain desirable or (undesirable) matters, behavioural patterns, life styles and tell us how we could obtain (or avoid) things, and what price we have to pay for success (or failure). So they are showing suggestions, laws, parables, orders, slogans, preachings, warnings and similar things. Nowadays there is an increasing tendency for them to occur in the form of advertisements... (Gerbner 2002: 12-3).

Much of the marketing activity of television is aimed at attracting children and teenagers as consumers. It is primarily the producers of toys, sweets and fast food restaurants that consider youngsters their main target group. Children, as viewers, prefer advertisements which offer the behavioural patterns of a child of their own age, or a fairy-tale character. The producers of advertisements take advantage of animation tools to put a child or a cartoon character on the screen. Child actors frequently appear in advertisements showing household products, as the story-lines often involve family surroundings. Many advertisements for children call on them directly to consume a product: such advertisements depict products and their consumption as desirable goals. (Younger children might persuade their parents to buy that product while older ones may use their pocket money to purchase the product directly.)

In addition to a call for immediate consumption, this process contributes a great deal to what can be termed 'consumer's socialisation'. There is concern in some countries that a child's not-yet fully developed personality is influenced by the violent effects of the

consumption culture and that children's advertisement consumption should be regulated. In Norway, for example, advertisements for children are controlled. No advertisements aimed directly at children are allowed to be broadcast, and no advertisements may appear before, after or during a children's television programme (Werner 1998: 120). There is no such radical limitation implemented in Hungary.

Children first encounter television advertisements in early childhood, but it is only later, perhaps at 8-10 years, that they consciously realise their role as a consumer. Small children understand only the amusing function of advertisements (something 'funny', or which 'can be sung' etc.). Very often, they are not even able to separate advertisements from the main programmes. The advertisement producers take advantage of this by utilising well-known and popular cartoon characters in their advertisements. In essence, small children perceive advertisements as similar to the music video clips that are made for them: they like those which are funny, full of action and have an interesting story. However, these clips and advertisements may well have an influence on their visual culture, language use and manners in general.

For the present study we investigated advertisements broadcast on Saturday mornings, between cartoons and other children's programmes. We recorded all advertisements shown on three Saturday mornings from the two leading Hungarian commercial channels Television2 and RTL Klub (all advertisements shown on four Saturday mornings) in February and March 2003. In total, we recorded about 70 different advertisements..

We used the content analysis method to investigate them. In general, it can be stated that important social and individual values and moral values are sacrificed to a story which is funny and full of action. The intention of this paper is, however, not to moralise. It is clear to us that the traditional (puritan) values and norms have lost their effect in post-industrial societies, and that in the world of unlimited possibilities of self-realisation and freedom, they might be suspended. Nevertheless, we think it is worth addressing this effect because the behavioural patterns shown as attractive and desirable in advertisements may fixate in children and youngsters who are not yet capable of moral reflection.

Short advertisement clips are often made amusing by showing a story in which someone is deceived or made fun of. It is not unusual for advertisements for children to contain such an element. Some depict a situation in which a parent or grandparent is made fun of. These stories do not reflect a value conflict, but they illustrate in an amusing way how 'expert' children are in the world of chocolates and toys.

Other advertisements, however, do show the relativisation of fundamental moral values. For instance, the value of respect for others is violated in an advertisement in which a boy, listening to a Walkman, appropriates the seat of a girl in an airport, and mockingly watches her embarrassment when she returns to 'her' seat. Another such disturbance of values is presented in an advertisement where a grandmother is overtly ignored and can only gain attention by offering a certain kind of sweets to the children.

Funny, and therefore very popular advertisements, often include children being untruthful. Honesty as a value is disregarded in an advertisement where a boy tells his teacher, who has telephoned to talk to his father, that the father is not at home although in fact he is at home drinking coffee. The deception here is not considered a sin in a moral sense, just a cute roguery: this is expressed by the father's smile. Another example shows a grandmother taking her grandson to the bus because his class is going on an excursion.

The grandmother arranges his hair and clothes and gives him some pudding 'to eat something healthy'. As soon as he boards the bus the boy rumples his hair and clothes and gives away the food. Grandma's loving care is disregarded, while conformity to the group, looking 'cool', etc. are highlighted.

Many advertisements utilise the tool of calling the product 'irresistible'. The cute little boy stealing another child's sweets is depicted as smart, brave and exemplary in the context of the film. Sometimes even adults cannot resist temptation, like the grandfather who eats his grandchildren's chocolate and then says it was the dolls. In this example, the violation of property is supplemented by the depiction of honesty as a relative moral value. Stealing a desired object occurs twice in another advertisement. Boys are hiding under a bed while girls are watching television, not thinking about what might happen. A refreshment bottle is placed next to the bed, and the boys take it. When the parents come home, the girls also climb under the bed: 'Friends and party' says the text. Another example shows children offering their 'help' to their parents, but there is a condition, which is receiving the desired sweets. Similarly in another advertisement children ask a mother if they can help, showing her their empty cocoa mugs: this suggests that everything has its price, even in the world of children. These advertisements stultify solidarity as a value.

Our material includes several examples which make use of the most effective weapon of adults' advertisements, sexual temptation, even though the advertisements are primarily made for children and youngsters. In our material, two chocolate advertisements used it: during examinations a woman patient 'rushes' the male psychologist to obtain the desired chocolate bar from his pocket. The punch line - 'Triple enjoyment' - contains a conscious application of the word *enjoyment* and its connotation of sexual nature. In another example, a boy wants to swing on a rope to a girl, like Tarzan, but his trousers are snagged on a tree branch. The woman bites into the chocolate. 'Chocolate is even better than sex' is the implicit 'funny' message.

Naked bodies are also deliberately used in advertising cosmetics for teenagers (Featherstone 1995). Both pictures and text suggest that success with the others depends on the use of this or that shower gel. Several moral values are relativised by placing success, sex and consumption in the same semantic field, i.e. success = consumption, success = sex, sex = consumption etc. Advertisements are necessarily consumption-oriented. Their visually attractive world promises freedom and happiness but they only offer consumption that is – deceitfully – depicted as the equivalent of freedom and happiness. A person who identifies himself or herself with the consumer society *without any criticism* is likely to become someone unable to make deep social links, and while living with the charm of youth, beauty and wealth, will also become a narcissistic person who is never satisfied (Lasch 1976).

It is not our aim in the present study though to examine the actual effects of advertisements on children. Empirical research in this field is likely to reveal significant differences among the children. As Vikartovszky (2003) found in her case studies, some teenagers found hurting people funny in the advertisements, but others noticed a moral issue therein. The real effects of the advertisements on children are probably even more nuanced and depend on many other factors, e.g. the socio-cultural background. Our analysis of advertisements only suggests the possibility that children will accept the objectionable behavioural forms shown on television. If we consider these violations of

values, education may be one way to counter-balance these processes by showing moral values and evoking moral reflections.

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