

● Enrique Vergara & Ana Vergara  
Santiago (Chile)

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# Representation of Childhood in Advertising Discourse in Chile

## Representación de la infancia en el discurso publicitario en Chile

### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the main characteristics of advertising discourse in relation to childhood and its engagement with children's view of this stage of life, in line with «new social studies» and critical discourse analysis. This discussion seeks to complement the functionalist perspective of communication studies in the field of advertising content analysis by incorporating a discursive focus, taking into account contextual issues that may condition the interpretation of messages. Firstly, discourse analysis was used as a means of exploring social representations, identifying stereotypes employed in children's advertising in order to establish the possible functions of the message. To contrast these findings, group interviews were conducted with 10 and 11 year-old boys and girls from middle-income families in Santiago, Chile. A comparison of both findings reveals a complex and relational notion of childhood. Children see themselves as burdened by parents, and adulthood as an effective lack of liberty, where the archetypes reveal an image of the adult world as a state of loss with respect to the exercise of creativity, imagination and freedom. These archetypes correlate to children's television output, where a number of shows ridicule the image of adults through irony and parody, presenting them as incompetent in their roles as parents and in their moral authority.

### ABSTRACT (Spanish)

El artículo analiza las principales características que presenta el discurso de la publicidad respecto de la infancia, y su relación con la perspectiva que los niños tienen de esta etapa de la vida, tomado como referencia los «nuevos estudios sociales» y el análisis crítico de discursos. Con esto, se busca complementar la perspectiva funcionalista de los estudios de comunicación en el ámbito del análisis de contenido, incorporando un enfoque discursivo que considere los aspectos contextuales, que puedan condicionar la interpretación de los mensajes publicitarios. El método utilizado, en una primera etapa, fue el análisis de discurso aplicado a la publicidad infantil, donde se establecieron las funciones posibles del mensaje, con el objetivo de explorar las representaciones sociales e identificar los estereotipos utilizados para generar estos spots publicitarios. En una segunda etapa, y para contrastar los hallazgos obtenidos, se realizaron entrevistas grupales a niños y niñas de estrato socio-económico medio de 10 y 11 años, de la ciudad de Santiago de Chile. Al confrontar ambos resultados, se destaca una noción compleja y relacional de infancia. Una visión de sí mismos como niños agobiados por los adultos y de la adultez como ausencia de libertad efectiva, y donde los arquetipos identificados hablan de una imagen del mundo adulto como condición de pérdida respecto del ejercicio de la creatividad, la imaginación y la libertad. Estos arquetipos tienen su correlato en la oferta televisiva infantil, donde en buena parte de sus series, la imagen del adulto es ridiculizada a través de la ironía y la parodia, mostrándolos como poco competentes en sus roles de padres y en su autoridad moral.

### KEYWORDS

Advertising, childhood, consumption, discourse analysis, media, media television, social representations.  
Publicidad, infancia, consumo, análisis de discurso, medios, comunicación, televisión, representaciones sociales.

◆ Dr. Enrique Vergara Leyton is Associate Professor at the Communications and Arts Faculty of Diego Portales University (Chile) ([enrique.vergara@udp.cl](mailto:enrique.vergara@udp.cl)).

◆ Ana Verga del Solar is Program Director and Associate Professor at the School of Psychology of Diego Portales University (Chile) ([ana.vergara@udp.cl](mailto:ana.vergara@udp.cl)).

## 1. Introduction

This paper discusses some characteristics of television advertising discourse in relation to childhood. These characteristics will be contrasted in the final discussion with children's view of this stage of life. While the representation of childhood in advertising can be understood as a reflection of societal discourse on this stage, and the role assigned to child and adult from a discursive perspective, important questions are raised about its influence on the construction of the same social discourse from a child's perspective. This representation seeks to complement advertising discourse studies that follow the paradigm of the influence of advertising, where childhood is seen as a vulnerable state in which the child fails to become a full subject of interpretation (Fernández, 2006; Bringué, 2001; Young, 1990). By contrast, from a discursive perspective the process that occurs between the production and interpretation of the message is not linear, but rather is built on contextual aspects of the interpretation of messages (Vergara & Chávez, 2010).

This discussion is of particular importance considering children's high exposure to television advertising, the place it occupies in their daily lives and, therefore, the prompt assimilation of minors into the logic of consumption. This prominence has raised concerns in different quarters about the possible effects of television advertising on a young audience. As Perales and Pérez-Chica (2008) point out, the scientific literature in relation to childhood presents a general consensus on the role of media in three areas: the role played in the acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes and patterns of behavior; the way in which this influence is concurrent on the cognitive, attitudinal and factual level; and its presence in the formation of stereotypes, identity guidelines and, therefore, in the production of meaning. Advertising in particular has been the subject of constant preoccupation, expressed through widespread international regulation of advertising aimed at children (Ferrer, 2007).

## 2. Conceptual framework

Childhood has emerged as a specific study topic in the field of «new social studies». The so-called «conceptual autonomy of children» elevates childhood to an object of study in its own right rather than a secondary component of family environment, education, public policy or other sectors (Prout, 2001). This does not imply its study in isolation, but rather a conceptual autonomy that allows a better understanding of the inclusion of children in institutional settings, and ongoing relationship with socio-historical changes and

gender, class, ethnicity and other areas. These studies have, in parallel, begun to explain moral, cognitive and social competence in children, contradicting traditional research based on rigid methodologies and disabling assumptions on childhood (Mayall, 2001; Christensen & James, 2000; Greene & Hill, 2005; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

In this light, how children face the world around them, determined increasingly by new skills and cultural values associated with consumption, is of particular importance. We find generations who, in consequence, construct their subjectivity on new bases, increasingly defined by images issuing from the media (Vergara & Vergara, 2008). In this regard, advertising is a substantial part of the social construct in the sense that it projects an image of society, the creation of meanings and patterns of behavior. Thus, the reception of advertising and its relation to the perception of social reality, is a process of cultural formation where knowledge of reality is structured to guide, understand and participate in daily interactions (Belmonte & Guillamon, 2005). Advertising, then, delivers models, new meanings, values, behavior patterns and ways of thinking and interpreting reality (Catalán, 1982; Lomas, 2001; Vergara & Rodríguez, 2010). In this context, the question of children's advertising discourse, and the mediation of children as subjects of action and interpretation, becomes particularly relevant.

In the case of Chile, two factors should be taken into account when approaching children's advertising. First, the role of television as a mainstay of traditional media advertising, which in 2010 reached 48.2% of the total investment in the case of broadcast television, and 3.9% in cable (ACHAP, 2010). Second, according to data released by the National Television Council (CNTV, 2008, 2010), the penetration of pay-TV reached 43.3%, significantly increasing children's television output through niche channels aimed at this segment, thus becoming an important media platform for advertising to children. In the case of broadcast television, programming targeted to boys and girls aged 6 to 12 years reached 12% of the general programming offering in all-ages segments. The percentage of advertising accounted for 22% of the totality of programming for this segment, translating to approximately thirteen minutes of advertising per hour of programming. Finally, regarding the distribution of children's offerings by sector, the highest concentration was seen in «Toys and Entertainment», followed by «Food», with 39.9% and 22.8% respectively.

As Uribe (2005) notes, the increased output of children's products and television content has resulted

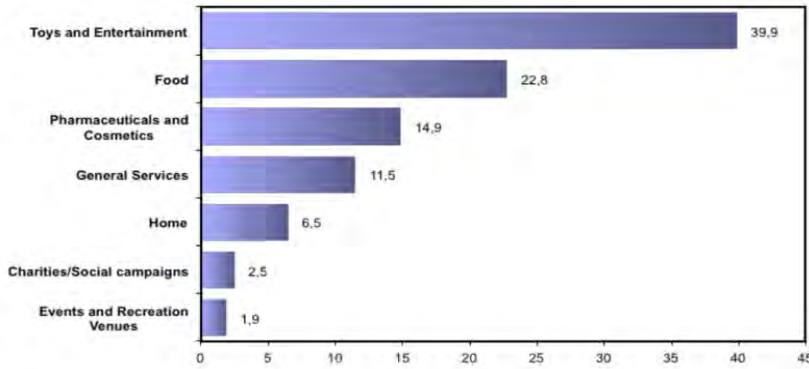


Figure 1. Television advertising for Boys and Girls (6-12), by sector. Year 2010  
Source: CNTV, Advertisement in adolescent and children's programming, 2010.

Speech acts, considers an important part of the communication processes to be located at the level of connotation; in other words, that which is not explicit, but implicit. Hence, the ways through which meaning is given to the implicit are not relegated to encoding and decoding, but correspond to networks of meaning and logics of interpretation that reveal

in substantial changes in how advertising represents childhood, delivering a proposal and vision with respect to it. One aspect of this is the economic empowerment of children in their consumption decisions. According to relevant studies conducted since 2003 by CNTV, McCann-Erickson and Research Chile (2003), children between 8 and 13 were able to decide, discriminate and influence purchase decisions, a reality incorporated by parents as part of the education expected for a child of that age. In parallel, school was the main area of consumption for this age segment, reflected in that 78% claimed to regularly receive money from their parents for this purpose. This money was destined primarily to satisfy food needs through snacks<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, this type of consumption occurs across the board in all socioeconomic groups.

### 3. Methodology

If we consider that children's television advertising disseminates not only content, but also establishes a relationship with its audience through the representation of imaginary meanings, behaviors, and mediations through the product, its study should shift from content analysis to discourse analysis. In this sense, a discourse is determined by production conditions and a linguistic system (Bardin, 1986: 168-169). The analysis of children's advertising, then, seeks to establish the possible functions of message on a connotative, contextual and relational level in order to explore their social representations. Amigo (2007) postulates that discourse analysis, stemming both from the development of Pragmatic Linguistics and the Theory of

cognitive strategies. These strategies operate, in turn, as «common sense», enabling meanings and interpretations broadly in line within the same socio-cultural context; in other words, the connotative dimension of the messages. One of the key aspects through which logics of meaning in children's advertising can be identified is through the characterization of stereotypes, defined as the use of images, messages and social roles associated with products belonging to the collective imagination, and which are consciously simplified for quick and easy reception (Sánchez-Aranda, 2002).

As Bardin (1986: 23) points out, in this type of analysis there are no ready-made templates, only basic patterns that are in general difficult to transfer. This complexity explains why methodological approaches to advertising copy can vary significantly, both in terms of theoretical perspectives as in their stated objectives (Capdevila & Fernández, 2006: 176). Considering all this, we chose to design a grid for the analysis that would help identify, from an interpretive perspective, the discourses of advertising to children on the basis of the main stereotypes in use. These received a subjective grading on a scale of 10 to 100 to determine their place within the discourse of advertising<sup>4</sup>. Due to its qualitative character, this grid did not work with a representative base of a determined universe; rather, it expanded on the meaning of the messages<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the validity of the analysis is, in accordance with Krippendorff (1990: 230), of an external kind in the

Expenditures	Socioeconomic group (3)				Total
	BC1 (High)	C2 (Middle)	C3 (Lower-middle)	D (Low)	
Food items (*)	82%	88%	89%	91%	89%
School supplies	28%	22%	23%	14%	20%
Travel expenses	11%	4%	6%	5%	6%

Table 1. What do you buy with the money you receive?

(\*) Cookies, snacks, juices, sweets, caramels, soft drinks, chocolates and snack bars. Source: CNTV (2003).

sense that the results effectively reflect real phenomena sensitive to context, and where, rather than measuring, the intention is to capture the richness and complexity of advertising copy.

The selection of the test sample was of an intentional type<sup>6</sup>. For this purpose, we defined a sample of commercials that met two criteria: being directed at boys and girls aged 6 to 12 years, and that promoted the consumption of food (snacks). These criteria were adopted due to the percentage of children's advertising devoted to this sector (see figure 1), and the consumption of snacks in this segment (see table 1).

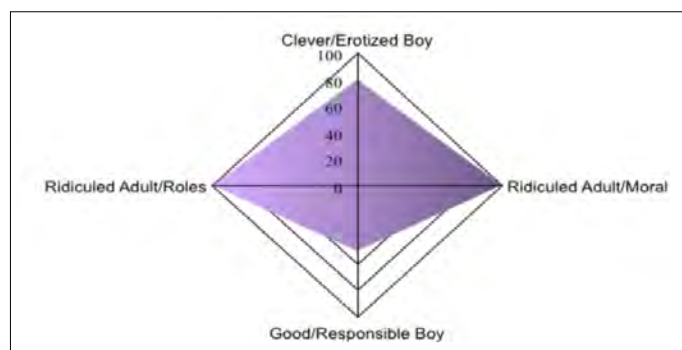
#### 4. Presentation of results

The first thing we note in the analyzed commercials are the different forms taken on by the relation between fantasy and reality in one discourse, with a marked role of men in terms of gender. In this context, we have identified four stereotypes associated directly with children and their environment, consisting mainly of parents and peers. First, in relation to their peers, is the image of the boy, which manifests in two poles: on the one hand, and with greater prominence, the stereotype that we have termed the clever/erotized boy, in which he expresses the role of male conqueror with respect to adult women; on the other hand, the representation that has been termed good/responsible boy, who, although never shown explicitly, is invited to play a critical role in unjust situations. Secondly, the adult is presented in two polarities of equal prominence: the stereotype of the Ridiculed Adult with respect to their role, primarily as a father-mother and husband-wife; and the Ridiculed Adult in its moralizing, the child «must be» variant. A common element of these polarities is the role assigned to the presence of the child: the ability to summarize and resolve inconsistencies of the world and of adult discourse.

This is seen in the analysis of Costa cereal commercials, where a central character named «Monkey», a rag doll who assumes an adult role, goes to a massage parlor to be attended by a model. His attitude is that of an adult-child who seeks, disingenuously, to be caressed sensually by the woman, thus showing that he is a man of success as he eats the cereal bar. Interestingly, when the woman calls a male masseur to continue the job, the character leaves the stretcher stating that he feels fine. In this manner, the pleasure the woman's massage causes is presented alongside the

flavour of the cereal bar, transforming both pleasures into one sensory experience. In this context, the product acts as a mediator of the existence and validation of these feelings as acceptable for the child. In a second commercial of the same brand, the same character appears in a family kitchen with two children, assuming the position of an adult through a moralizing discourse about the importance of sharing, a value he himself is not willing to practice with their cereal, thus ridiculing the moral discourse of the adult world. Here again, the relationship of the product with the child demonstrates the ability to assess adult discourse as a formalism without relation to reality, in which the individual takes precedence over solidarity with others.

In the case of Nestlé chocolate commercials, the two featured characters are young Chilean children's television stars who invite children to be photographed next to the chocolate, and present positive demands through a printed ad: how to care for animals, the environment, or rejection of «bullying», all this with the aim of encouraging viewers to participate in a contest for invitations to a music concert. This space of revolt against certain practices (the slogan being: Trencito



chocolate became a rebel), is confined to an expression of intent and the possibility of winning a contest, removing true protagonism of the children with regard to their stated demands. Thus, their claims do not generate a real impact, but rather are merely stated, which appears to suffice in place of the realization in practice or action.

Finally, in the Bilz & Pap soft drink commercials, the central theme is the constant combination of elements of reality with fiction, ridiculing adults in their roles and naïveté with respect to the confusing situations and daily gags created by the children. In one commercial, this occurs through the confusion caused by the arrival of an alleged boyfriend of the grandmother, who happens to be a cat, which disrupts the family. In another commercial of the same beverage, a

son with many twin brothers causes a similar confusion for the parents. Although in both cases the children manage to make fun of the adults in the home, and obtain recognition as the smartest in the eyes of their peers, it is worth noting that they emerge as articulators of the dynamics and sociability of the family. Without their presence and ability to reveal the potential inadequacy and ridiculous nature of the adult world, family life is presented as devoid of all routine and playful dimension.

In discursive terms, it is interesting that note that there is no sign of the existence of a relationship with the adult world itself, but rather a proposal of reality built from within the child's world, where everyday life is infused with fantasy elements. In this proposal, irreverent criticism of the adult world comes in two dimensions: ridicule of adults in their roles and moral discourse. This irreverence towards adulthood becomes the space where the stereotype of the masculine clever-child is structured, which takes advantage of the incompetence and stupidity of adults to demonstrate primacy among his peers. The child-adult manipulates situations, seizes the moment, works only for himself, and finally uses his status as a child to escape difficult situations without having to answer for his actions.

The archetype of the clever-child, prominent in the commercials we have analyzed, has its counterpart in children's television output, which is built to a large degree on characters with these features. As an example, we can cite two representative cases. One is the children's series *The Simpsons*, which shows a family immersed in daily life and irony. Both the aesthetics and the situations presented are based on excess and sarcasm about the reality and discursive elements of television. The father of the family seems more concerned with himself than his children, and the mother is portrayed as distracted and without depth. Despite their antics, the children of the family often seem more reasonable than their parents, and must play a significant role in solving the problems their parents tend to generate. The other case is the children's series *The Fairly OddParents*, in which the main character is a 10 year old boy who lives with both parents who pay little attention, leaving him in charge of a selfish and uncaring young nanny. However, the child has the support of two fairy godparents with magical powers, who grant wishes that tend to solve his problems. Despite the tragic nature of the story, the series is presented in ironic and sarcastic language, its characters not necessarily good or bad, but rather morally weak and selfish, or kind-hearted, once they repent.

This media context is aligned with the advertising

discourse we have analyzed, having endowed its characters with the attitudes of the protagonists of the series mentioned above. In a world wrecked by the incompetence of adults, a personal narrative is valued, with a discourse geared to the child's recognition by his peers, and portrayal of children as successful, superior to their parents, and equipped with the necessary skills to break the rules of the adult world, thus achieving what they seek, which is generally their own pleasure. Along with this archetype a second, less pronounced discursive role is that of the good and responsible child, dedicated to just causes. This does not achieve the success of the stereotype of the child-adult, however; his role is limited to a concern that is rewarded with the possibility of a promotional prize. Here there is no cunning or ingenuity as in the previous case, only passivity after reporting a just cause. No more is expected of him, there is no role other than to wait for a possible prize, and the question of what will happen to his demands is not asked. In short, he can't be considered a responsible person.

In the above analysis, childhood is seen as a state separate from the adult world, in which the child is encouraged to act according to his desire and personal benefit. However, no instances of mediation and relationship with the adult world materialize. In this sense, childhood is seen as the possibility of enjoying a relationship devoid of responsibility for the immediate environment.

## 5. Discussion

The results presented in the previous section pose the following questions about the meaning and uses of advertising to children: To what extent do these representations influence those of boys and girls with respect to childhood?; how are the stereotypes we have identified used and socialized? Confronting these results with the perspective of children with respect to childhood, it is possible to establish some relations between the two discourses. According to recent, non-directive group interviews<sup>7</sup> with children of 10 and 11 years of middle socioeconomic status, both in mixed contexts and single sex, a sometimes desolate image of adulthood is revealed, presented as a state of loss in which, due to life circumstances, the exercise of imagination, creativity and freedom itself becomes impossible. At other times, the use of irony, and outright parody, seems to help these children to forgive the fragile, hesitant and irrational character of adults. In this context, the image of adults is ridiculed in a similar manner to that found in advertising discourse, revealing their lack of competence in their roles as parents

and teachers, thus disqualifying their moral authority.

The origin of this coincidence is worth pondering: Is advertising understanding certain discursive phenomena present in children and magnifying them to serve its objectives?; is advertising meant to influence the way children conceive adulthood? Likely, both processes occur simultaneously and interdependently: a certain demystification of the role and authority of the adult is an expression of sociocultural changes in inter-generational relations, which are picked up early by advertising, and, at the same time, children use their narratives to configure their discourse and relationship with the adult world. It is also interesting to compare the image that advertising discourse presents of a child capable of exerting social criticism and demands in the face of adulthood and its decisions, with the discourse of the children interviewed in the investigation. In the latter case, to give an example, children are very critical of the constant transgression of an «ethics of discourse» by adults (Habermas, 1989; 1991), since, according to their account, their arguments and reasons are not heard, they are not allowed to dissent, and the discursive acts of adults involving promises and commitments of some kind are often not respected further on.

Moreover, children appear to be developing new values due, in part, to the influence of media and cultural globalization phenomena, such as respect for nature, the rights of individuals and non-discrimination. In Chile, for example, the notion of children's rights is being incorporated into their language, becoming in some cases a tool for advocacy. An example of this is children who, alone or with the support of other adults, report their parents for physical abuse, or their schools for acts of discrimination. For Giberti (1997), who has analyzed similar situations in Argentina, these cases highlight existing fractures in an adult world that once seemed more compact, and is currently shown to children in all its ideological diversity, an issue the latter tend to perceive clearly. Authors like Garretón (2000) and Mayall (2002) have observed the emergence of an «intersubjective ethics» or «moral commitment», in which children emphasize the interpersonal well-being of children and adults over rigid principles. However, as mentioned above, advertising discourse seems to have an ambivalent relationship with this critical and demanding capacity in children, and does not grant them a role beyond the act of purchasing. A possible explanation for this is the importance of its commercial objective, which overtakes other considerations.

Finally, the role of the masculine gender in the advertising we have analyzed can be explained, in

part, by the stereotypes held by those responsible for advertising campaigns developed for children's segments. It should also be noted that the discourse of the interviewed children is not necessarily innovative in terms of gender, as it responds to a traditional perspective, where the role of women is recognized through hidden, and in consequence, unseen strategies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development of Chile (FONDECYT) for providing the funding to conduct the research on which this article is based: «Childhood from perspective of children. A discursive study of middle socioeconomic status in Santiago, Chile». (FONDECYT, 1100811). This study includes co-researchers Paulina Chávez and Mónica Peña, who have collaborated in the writing of this article, and technical support from teachers Pablo Contreras and Pedro Vera.

<sup>2</sup> Snacks are generally associated with «junk food», and not part of the day's meals, but they are used to temporarily satisfy hunger at any time of day. Their nutritional value is low, containing excess additives, and do not usually contribute to health.

<sup>3</sup> According to market research firm ADIMARK (2004), the socioeconomic map of Santiago is structured as follows: upper strata (ABC1): 11.3%, middle strata (C2): 20.1% medium-low strata (C3): 25.6% lower strata (D): 34.5% and extreme poverty (E): 8.5%.

<sup>4</sup> The identification of advertising stereotypes, defined as categories, was conducted in an inductive manner; in other words, exploring the advertising text in order to identify the relevant aspects.

<sup>5</sup> The grid design for the analysis of the commercials considered six columns: Actants (people or animate and inanimate characters); Place; Audio; Actions, Identified Stereotypes and Grading of Importance.

<sup>6</sup> Andréu (2000: 25) notes that intentional sampling does not follow fixed rules, nor does it or specify in advance the number of units to select, on the grounds that it may be altered during the investigation, and with the aim of improving the quality and richness of the information. In addition, the selection of more units can be interrupted when it is understood that it has reached a saturation point by the amount of information collected.

<sup>7</sup> Exploratory study of children of middle socioeconomic status living in the city of Santiago, Chile, conducted between 2010 and 2011.

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