



Worcester Papers in English
and Cultural Studies

Issue 8, Spring 2010

Decoding advertisement story telling: children subjects or objects?

Tessy Anthony C.

Children are told stories that help them to construct a world view, a cultural context, to define what they are and what they believe. This could be through literature, orally, from experiences and through media. My paper is on the advertising world of storytelling and its impact on children today in India. Very often it is adult politics and polemics which creep in and are responsible for a child's perspective.

Paul Hazard is of the opinion that adult interference in children's thinking can influence the functioning of a child. He says:

Children and grown-ups belong to different worlds. Time, which deals so ruthlessly with the body, is only too often just as pitiless with the soul. Adults are rarely free; they are prisoners of themselves. . . . Children are rich with all they do not own, rich with potential wonders of their universe" (1-2).

However, adults don't let them be. They influence children's thinking by airing their views when asked or not. This could be verbal and visual. Storytelling through advertising can promote racism, sexism and class prejudice. There are very stringent rules regarding advertisements in India, but I am told this is not the case in the international market.

Media has a great impact on our lives today especially the visual, verbal and auditory world of advertising which can leave a lasting impact. If this is the case for adults, what then is the effect of advertisements directed at impressionable children? In advertisements if the story line is not impressive the product will fail in the market leading to economic slump. Some of the best advertisement storytelling is meaningful it does not require any elaboration or explanation. Advertisement is a web of story-telling. Who is it that doesn't like a good story by a good story teller? It caters to our reason and to our emotions, and it cleverly follows the guerrilla marketing technique. Every brand has a story since

time and again it has been proved that story telling is a necessary ingredient of advertising.

According to the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*:
advertising is a form of communication intended to promote the sale of the product or service to influence the public opinion, to gain political support or to advance a particular cause" (Sontaki, 2).

The best advertisements communicate using stories and the best brands build relevance through the same mechanism. For example The Amul butter advertisement tells the story of an issue relevant to current times. Indian viewers are familiar with the cute little cartoon figure of a girl who appears in the Amul advertisements saying, "Utterly butterly delicious Amul!!". Amul has been called a social observer advertisement. These advertisements are iconic and contemporary, and generally have a funny side to them. Though the words used are simple they are carefully chosen. The storyteller borrows heavily from life and readers /viewers co-create scenes from life in their own minds.

The technological revolution has changed the tools available to storytellers, from oral to manuscript to print to electronics and computer. In life or organizations very few have this power of story-telling. Today modern storytellers can often be found in the executive suit whether as a sales representative, an entrepreneur or a salesperson trying to persuade and appease. Stories reveal the speaker's interpretation of the world. In addition he is trying to co-relate/vibe his thoughts with those of his viewers/listeners to persuade them to buy the product. Human beings hear words but think in pictures.

Advertising is, according to The American Marketing Association, Chicago:

any paid form of non-personal presentation of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor.

(Chunnawalla, 2).

What advertisements are doing is to speak about the benefits of the product but embed it in a story so the message is swallowed like a sugar coated pill. It is better than a story told by a grandmother for with advertisements there is both a visual and an *auditory effect so that children will watch with enthusiasm and eagerness*. Stories are fundamental to the way in which authors

structure information. This information is memorable and said with conviction. Furthermore the reader/viewer perceives a world the author wishes to create. An advertisement message is carefully disguised as a story so it can enter the customer's mindset. Advertisements communicate stories with a minimal number of words but make use of other methods such as images and sound. If the advertisement story is powerful it will compel the receiver to recreate that world in the mind's eye.

In some advertisements children are shown as subjects and in others they become the objects. In some advertisements children are subjects of storytelling, to target at the adults, to encourage consumerism. This is the case of most health drinks such as Bournvita, Junior Horlicks, Boost and so on. Several offers are made by these companies offering free Frisbies, water-bottle cum snack boxes, badminton racquets and all kinds of toys to encourage children to insist on their buying this particular drink. A good message can also emerge from an advertisement. For example the babies shown from different racial backgrounds in the United Colors of Benetton advertisement brings out a multicultural mental map. Most Indian advertisements (many of the following examples being available for viewing on U Tube) reveal human relationships, for example the Vicks Advertisement which shows the close relationship between a father and child. Often there is humour too in advertisements like the Tata Press advertisement where the Indian woman goes into hospital for delivery and when her Indian husband comes in to see the child, he finds that the baby is an Afro-child. The advertisement encourages him to sue his wife for divorce. The Junior Horlicks advertisement is about how parents are dreaming about their 5 year old's future and he is busy playing around. They imagine him becoming an engineer because he's tampering with his toys, they then visualize that he will become a doctor. Towards the end they find him passing them, role-playing as a mere vegetable seller shouting out his wares aloud when they burst out laughing. The Britannia Tiger advertisement for biscuits, the Bank of India advertisement and the Visa card advertisement are brilliant examples of advertisements where children are used as subjects. In the Bank of India advertisement the grandfather advises his young grandson to take good care of his piggy bank. The child earnestly follows this advice

carrying the clay pig with him everywhere. He eventually takes it into the Bank of India where they sympathetically and 'lovingly' put the piggy bank for safe keeping in a safe vault. These advertisements are not just mere announcements but have a unique, original message content to get the desired response. It is touching, effective message communication and convincing for the customer to be put on the appropriate track.

Sometimes the function of the child in certain advertisements can raise many arguments. The charges levelled against advertisements have something constructive to say and sometimes something negative. Advertisements tell stories constructing world views that can be shocking to a grown up. In the Hyundai car advertisement a small child is seen driving the car. It is to show that he belongs to the next generation since the car is also for the next generation. The child driving the car shows how simple and easy it is to drive the car or that its mere "child play". So those who buy the car will find it a joy and easy to manoeuvre. There are advertisements to chasten adults to remember that the child who should have a fairy tale life is going through it like a nightmare as in advertising materials focussing on refugee camps, to stop begging, childcare advertisements, child labour advertisements, and advertisements to save children.

During children's TV viewing time the majority of food advertisements are for unhealthy food and dominate children's programmes. Some food advertisements where children are used as subjects are the Maggi advertisement, the Kinder Joy advertisement etc. and many of the soap and toothpaste advertisements to convey the message of family or health/hygiene. The sole aim today is to make money, which ever the industry. The volume of advertising has grown. They do not help children but only increase the company's profit. It is therefore important for the right kind of ethics to be communicated to the child if life is a matter of choices. According to Bertrand Russell:

Ethics is a code of values which guide our choices and actions and determine the purpose and course of our life (Sun.menloschool.org).

Advertising is a skill, as it were, to weave one's charm umbrella. Children are the focal point for intense advertising. Advertisement only speeds up consumerism especially since many

target juvenile consumers. My focus is on advertisements where children are affected by adult politics. Several soft drinks are targeted at children mainly as the prime market. It is found that these soft drinks contain carcinogenic substances and that have ingredients used to clean toilets. There are advertisements that speak of being a macho man or a super hero by drinking coffee, alcohol or smoking which gives out a wrong message to our young viewers. An example is the Diesel advertisement which says that "men don't cry". A car runs over a man and he refrains from crying out. And the slogan comes up saying that men do not cry. This is a very sexist notion that reaches out to its viewers.

Children cannot really make a discerning judgement about advertisements and most advertisements are not for them. Yet one cannot prevent children from watching TV commercials. Though it cannot be completely defined as an ethical issue, it is definitely of social concern that advertisements do not, for the most part, consider the fact that children lack the ongoing defences which allow them to view an advertisement objectively and evaluate it accordingly. In the case of a Pepsi advertisement, when it features a much-liked hero or celebrity jumping from the top of a building down to the top of a vehicle or bus etc., the young child does not have the judgement to evaluate whether such an act can be a dangerous one before they themselves actually go on to do something like that after drinking a can of Pepsi. Thus advertisements such as these and many others, for example where the child is urged to live in jeans and not to remove them for washing with the suggestion that one can jump into a washing machine to perform this function, provoke children to want something in this way to comply with the advertisement, do not consider any social issues or safety matters but most of the time enjoy the advantage by manipulating advertisements for children.

It is argued that children are more susceptible to deception, as they lack the ongoing learnt defences that adults have and cannot objectively evaluate advertisements. There could be stereotyping, racism and sexism in advertisements of which the child is unaware. Advertisements can make children more diffident for example with the fear of body odour and bad breath. There is substantial scope for manipulation of children especially through advertising and contributing to creating a malformed world for

them. Furthermore one should be careful as to when children watch TV advertisements.

With the latest technological advances in the fields of communication and transportation, a child's world is no longer limited to his immediate environment. As soon as he is able to watch television or listen to the radio, the child of today becomes a spectator at such provocative and stimulating events . . .

(Georgiou 414 - 415).

When members of a family sit together and watch television the adult can seldom clarify a child's queries. Even advertisements of contraceptives are aired when children could be watching the TV. Whether the idea that the time when such advertisements should be relayed must be fixed, so that children don't get to see such advertisements is debatable. It would be far more acceptable if TV viewing time could be a family time so parents would know what their children are watching. In addition parents should be equipped to make clarifications if the need arises. Many governments such as those of Australia, Norway, and Sweden etc. do not allow commercial sponsorship of children's programmes since young minds are impressionable. With children's increased access to new communication, the use of technology is incorporated into the fast pace and busy schedules of today's families. Parents are consequently less able to filter out messages from the world of advertising. The ever-increasing number of food advertisements contributes to children being 'raised' as part of an obese generation. The advertisement which spells out and shouts loudly to the child to want to consume harmful unhealthy food in enticing packages can be destructive at all levels. We often see the McDonald's advertisement that offers free gifts with every food pack. Generally it is a toy of some recent children's favourite hit movie. There are advertisements too where children are the subjects and the object, for example the Popy Umbrella advertisement, Scooby Day bags, or special kind of raincoats or shoes with lights that appear at the sole. Unfortunately advertising in relation to children is rather an unregulated area in India.

The field of advertising has witnessed tremendous changes over the passage of time. Signs have evolved from small, painted wood signs hung over doorways to plastic signs, lighted

signs, animated signs, billboards, and even bumper stickers. The town crier can now be heard on radio, television, in-store public address systems, and even on the phone via telemarketing. Clay tablets have today become newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, business cards, and an endless variety of printed matter. Whatever the changes that have taken place, the ancient art of storytelling still seems to be an essential element in the making of a successful advertisement. Successful advertisements have always been those that have been able to retain their vitality and newness and class which is directly connected with the story line. Advertisements transcend all barriers of geography and language. The viewer should be able to relate to it without problems of deciphering the language. Stories constitute a powerful currency in human relationships. One such advertisement is the *Times of India* advertisement. This advertisement won an award recently in 2008. Here the central protagonist is a child who shows the way to the hesitant adult, including a politician. It crosses barriers of gender, promotes unity and multiculturalism. In the course of TV viewing if a child is watching this advertisement then it is a pat on his back for we are paving the way for a better tomorrow, since the advertisement says "Lead India" and here we see a child leading the way. The advertisement shows how during a peak time in the morning everyone is rushing to work, school or office. A tree trunk on the road prevents the movement of people and traffic. This traffic jam incites frustration disappointment and bitterness in the adults and yet they are physically unmoved. Thankfully a young school-going boy gets down from his school bus and tries to move the tree trunk which is about ten times his weight. Some street children join him. It starts raining and taking the cue every one together man, woman and child of all classes and communities gives a helping hand and removes the hindrance on the road. The traffic and people can now move on. The boy is congratulated. After all the child of today is the citizen for tomorrow, so let us mould him with the right values even through persuasive advertisements. If advertising is ethical it has to live up to the socially accepted standards of truth.

Advertisements for and about children can be misleading to adults and children. If adult politics and polemics are responsible for the warped thinking of the child then vice versa the

child's mind and attitudes can also arrest the adult in his tracks to think, as in the *Times of India* example given above. A good advertisement story will resonate forever. Advertisements are an indispensable part of modern societies and can be an effective tool for education. It is high time that extra care is taken to make the positive advertisements that society requires. The advertisement industry has evoked a consciousness and sensitized some people to become more ethical. As a result we have advertisements like the *Times of India* advertisement and the *HSBC* advertisement which was awarded for the multicultural message of bringing nations together. Children are used in both these advertisements to reveal a unique and different perspective of what goes on in their minds and how they are perceived from the adults view point. With new winds of change ushering in, the future of ethical advertising seems brighter. These advertisements showcase a child's thinking in spite of all the adult politics and polemics. It is well said that "Child is the Father of Man".

Works cited

Hazard, Paul trans. Margureite Mitchell 'Books Children and Men'
Boston: The Horn Book Inc.1975.

Georgiou, Constantine. *Children and Their Literature* New Jersey:
Prentice- Hall, 1969.

Advertising.utexas.edu.21Sept.2007[http://advertising.utexas.edu/
research/quotes/Q100.html# Advis](http://advertising.utexas.edu/research/quotes/Q100.html# Advis)

Agencyfaqs.com.Nov.2007.[http://agencyfaqs.com/perl/advertising/
storyboard/index.html?cat=Fashion_and_lifestyle](http://agencyfaqs.com/perl/advertising/storyboard/index.html?cat=Fashion_and_lifestyle)>

Ahuja, B. N. and S. S. Chabra. *Advertising*. New Delhi: Surjeet
Publications, 1995.

Batra, Rajeev, John G. Myers and David A. Aaker *Advertising
Management*. 5th edition. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India.
1997.

Chunawalla et al *Advertising Theory and Practice*. Mumbai:
Himalaya Publishing House, 2003.

Ethics.org.au what is ethics is all about? 23 Sept. 2007
< [http:// www.ethics.org.au/about-ethics/what-is-ethics/
what is
ethics.html # top](http://www.ethics.org.au/about-ethics/what-is-ethics/what-is-ethics.html#top)>

Rathore B. S. *Advertising Management*. Mumbai: Himalaya
Publishing House 1997.

Sontakki C. N. *Advertising* Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers 2006.

Sun.menloschool.org 23
Sept.<http://sun.menloschool.org/~sportman/ethics/>

Wells. William John; Burnett, Sandra Moriarty. *Advertising
Principles and Practice*. 5th edition. New Delhi: Prentice
Hall, 2002.

123 Help Me.com Advertising ethics 4 July 2007

[http://www.123 Help Me/view.asp? id=35426](http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=35426)

123Help Me. com Television and Media -
ThePowerofAdvertising21Sept2007.

[http://www.123Help Me.com/view.asp?id=14006](http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=14006)



University
of Worcester

ISSN 1749-1150