

Representations of children in food advertisements in Cyprus : A sociosemiotic perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents a sociosemiotic approach to analyzing representations of children in food advertisements, applied through visual content analysis. In particular, we examine the representation of children in Cypriot print advertisements as main subjects in the construction of advertising messages for food. The selected target group is mainly parents or adults who have children. The present study focuses on the iconic dimension of verbal and non-verbal signs of twenty-six advertisements. Our study shows that advertisements for children's food in Cyprus localize global cultural values such as family, safety and food quality for children through codified iconic (plastic visual) signs that connote characteristics of "Cypriotness".

Keywords: advertising, children's food, content analysis, iconic signs, cultural values.

0. Research objectives

This study constitutes a semiotic analysis of food advertising for children in Cyprus based on a selected corpus of 26 print ads from four weekly magazines (TV Mania, Down Town, OK, Tiletheatis). We selected iconic sign systems and processed them using the SPSS 19 program for statistical analysis in social sciences. These magazines were distributed free of charge every weekend with local Cypriot newspapers over a period of two years (2009-2010) and were chosen because they have the highest circulation in Cyprus and are therefore read by the majority of the population¹ (TV Mania has 57% readability on Saturdays and Down Town 45% on Sundays). The objective of the study is to explore how second order significations are assigned through codified iconic (plastic visual) signs in the construction of food advertisements that make use of children to target adults. This is achieved by examining the iconic dimension of verbal and non verbal signs of the selected corpus, such as the colour of human features and its dominance in the overall composition, facial expressions and gaze, the location of children in advertisements and the representations of family life, the location of logos and typography.

1. Semiotics and nutritional practices

Food has been the focus of many studies, and as a subject it has been explored from a variety of cultural and semiotic perspectives. According to Parasecoli, it is just one of the semiospheres that constitute culture, interacting with, and at the same time defined by language, technology (including agriculture), politics and economics, and many other domains of everyday life.² Theorists have

¹ Giorgos Agapiou, "What Cypriots are reading," *Filelefteros tis Kiriakis*, October 11, 2009, p.21 <http://www.philenews.com/AssetService/Image.ashx?t=2&pg=13758&>, accessed February 2013.

² Fabio Parasecoli, "Savoring Semiotics: food in intercultural communication," *Social Semiotics* 21, no.5 (2011): 653.



highlighted the cultural aspect of food, its symbolic character³, subject to discourse and interpretation. Furthermore, food is considered as exclusive a human behaviour as language, since, according to Levi-Strauss, “if there is no society without language, neither is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food”.⁴ Levi-Strauss adopted a structural approach to food, devoting three volumes to his study, in which he stressed the significance of transforming a natural object such as raw food, into a cultural one, namely cooked food.⁵

Focusing more on a semiotic approach in his *Mythologies*, Barthes studied milk and wine, burgers and chips, and referred to alimentary signs that are connected to national symbolisms, with connotations such as Frenchness (*francité*).⁶ Researchers such as Douglas later approached food as a social code, stating that “if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed”.⁷ Parasecoli remarks that “a semiotic analysis of food can help us achieve a more nuanced and holistic interpretation of semiosis as a process that involves not only the mind but also the whole embodied experience, well beyond sensory perceptions”.⁸ Food is indeed a deeply cultural code, a complex cultural form of communication, and it would be very interesting to see how this cultural code can be promoted through print advertisements.

2. Advertising and children’s food

Kitchen observes that in the process of marketing and advertising children’s food “the concept of children’s food is historically recent. In many cultures childhood was considered merely a prelude to adulthood rather than a meaningful phase of human development in itself”.⁹ Advertising food to children is not only a sensitive issue because of its target audience, but also an interesting subject where we can explore the semiotic perspective of the advertising language used. For instance, as Elliot stresses, this is possible through concrete modes such as creating a funny atmosphere in the advertisements.¹⁰

The assignment of meaning to selling goods is common practice in advertising, and companies need to be careful about what food products they sell to children, and how they do it. Valentine remarks that

³ Vyacheslav V. Ivanov, “Semiotics of the 20th century,” *Sign Systems Studies* 36, no.1 (2008): 213-214.

⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, “Le triangle culinaire,” *L’Arc* 26 (1965): 22.

⁵ Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Mythologiques 1. Le cru et le cuit*. Paris: Plon, 1964.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Mythologiques 2. Du miel aux cendres*. Paris: Plon, 1966.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Mythologiques 3. L’Origine des manières de table*. Paris: Plon, 1968.

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), pp. 71, 74.

⁷ Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Myth, Symbol, and Culture, Daedalus* 101 no.1 (1972): 61.

⁸ Parasecoli, “Savoring Semiotics,” p. 661.

⁹ Philip J. Kitchen, *Marketing Communications: Principles and Practice* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), p. 147.

¹⁰ Charlene Elliot, “Marketing Fun Foods: A profile and Analysis of Supermarket Food Messages Targeted at Children,” *Canadian Public Policy-Analyse de Politiques* Vol. XXXIV, No. 2 (2008): 270.

“anyone who markets to kids or researches the youth market will be aware that children live in a culture of their own, created by, and for this age group. [...] It has therefore become a research holy grail to find ways to understand this world and track how the changing cultural context influences young people’s responses to brands”.¹¹ We also need to consider that young people and kids are not yet exposed to visual culture as much as adults are, and as Valentine observes, “[it] is, in effect, the constructed images of the self within their [the children’s] own culture that determines how kids “see” themselves and how they will want to be seen by others. They look, as it were, into a cultural mirror to find who they are”.¹² She also adds that “several things flow that are key to the semiotics of youth marketing.”

In another study regarding the reading of food advertisements, Tresidder observes that “[u]nderstanding the production and consumption of the images contained within food marketing requires the exploration of the complex layers of discourses and influences that socially and culturally embed the language of food and gastronomy within contemporary society,”¹³ and that this language is utilized by both the individual and the industry “to exchange the meanings and significance within both commercial and cultural settings”. This might be the reason why Beasley and Danesi remark, “[t]he feature that characterizes the business of modern advertising is that it has joined forces with marketing science in the business of getting products and services from producers to consumers in the most effective way possible [...] The work of the advertiser and marketer is, fundamentally, the work of the semiotician”.¹⁴ But how can Semiotics serve this work?

3. From Roland Barthes to Groupe µ

The increasing number of semiotic studies that examine the way meaning is constructed in advertisements demonstrates how Semiotics could give answers to the previous question. The first complete semiotic analysis of an advertisement is considered to be found in Barthes’ essay *La rhétorique de l’image* (1964), where he classified the advertisement’s signs or messages into two main types: *verbal* and *iconic* signs/messages. He then categorised iconic signs into *non-codified iconic* and *codified iconic signs*. For Guidère, Barthes’ division of signs turns advertising language into an advertising giant, a cluster of disparate signs.¹⁵ Indeed, the signs are disparate but they have a common purpose: to promote connotative meanings through their synergy.

¹¹ Virginia Valentine, “Using Semiotics to build powerful brands for children,” *Young Consumers: Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers* 4, no. 2 (2003): 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ Richard Tresidder, “Reading food marketing: the semiotics of Marks & Spencer!?” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 30, no. 9 (2010): 483.

¹⁴ Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi, *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising* (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 131.

¹⁵ Mathieu Guidère, *Publicité et traduction* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), p. 39.



Barthes did not develop further his classification of iconic signs, however this synergy, not only of disparate signs (verbal and iconic), but also of signs that share common characteristics (codified iconic and non-codified iconic) were marked by the Belgian Semioticians known as Groupe μ . Thus, almost thirty years later, Groupe μ (1992), in their famous work *Traité du signe visuel* (1992), elaborated on Barthes' classification, categorising iconic signs into *iconic visual signs* (Barthes' non-codified iconic signs) and *plastic visual signs* (Barthes's codified iconic signs) such as colour, form and texture. Groupe μ defines the relationship between iconic visual and plastic visual signs in the following way: "the plastic, being phenomenologically the signifying of the iconic signs, enables the identification of the iconic. In turn, the iconic, once identified, enables one to attribute content to the plastic elements which don't belong to the iconic type."¹⁶ According to Groupe μ , signifiers of an iconic entity coincide as a rule with signifiers of a plastic entity, and vice versa. Furthermore, there is a relation between the two types of visual signs. For Groupe μ , there is an *iconoplastic relationship* between iconic visual signs and plastic visual signs, and this relation

"is evidence that the plastic element is autonomous from the iconic representation. In fact plastic and iconic elements complement each other. Because it is the phenomenological signifier of the iconic sign, the plastic element allows viewers to identify the iconic, while the iconic element thus identified makes it possible to discover content in the plastic elements that do not belong to iconic types."¹⁷

In our study, we adopt Barthes' classification by emphasising the iconoplastic relationship between iconic visual signs and plastic visual signs, as proposed by Groupe μ . More precisely, we examine the plastic visual dimension of verbal signs, logos, colours, gazes, facial expressions, location of children in advertisements, family representations, and typography. The study of these plastic visual signs is based on our research objective, that is to investigate whether they are carriers of specific cultural connotations and values in food advertisements that use children, in order to facilitate the promotion of a product in the Cypriot market.

4. The plastic visual signs of the advertisements

As Kitchen highlights, non-verbal messages (like music or pictures of happy pretty children) are often employed by advertisers to signify values in children's advertisements for food, which will appeal to the

¹⁶ Groupe M., *Traité du signe visuel. Pour une rhétorique de l'image* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1992), p. 361.

¹⁷ Groupe M., "A rhetoric of visual statements", in *Advances in visual semiotics: the semiotic web 1992-93* by Thomas-A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), p. 597.

parents (especially the mother) who buys and prepares the child's food.¹⁸ On this basis, Channon¹⁹ stresses that this type of advertising had to communicate successfully at two levels: young mothers with children under 12, who are looking for new ideas to feed children and to children under 12 who are attracted by the novelty and playful appeal of the product. We are interested in seeing how the non-verbal signs function in the promotion of a product in Cypriot advertisements for children's food, to whom they appeal, and if these signs are culturally selected by advertisers to ensure the advertisement's success.

4.1. The plastic visual dimension of verbal signs and logos

The extension of analysis from the verbal to the non-verbal messages is of central interest to semiotic advertising research. In this study we will not be focusing on the linguistic content of the verbal message, but on its visual aspect. Many scholars have stressed the visual dimension of the language system, from Welby who in her discussion of translative-interpretative processes stated that "[...] we are forgetting that while language itself is a symbolic system its method is mainly pictorial,"²⁰ to Barthes who stated "I have a disease: I see language."²¹ According to Petrilli, all of these scholars evidenced an aspect of verbal signs that is irreducible to indexicality or to conventionality.²² Especially in advertising, language is imbued with visual significance. More specifically, not only the typography of verbal signs (as we will see later), but also the location of the verbal sign is yet another important aspect that should be taken into account when analysing the iconic signs of the advertisements under scrutiny, since "every text is itself an image, an observable surface."²³

As regards the linguistic aspect of the verbal signs of the studied advertisements, they are mainly in Greek (69%), belonging to Cypriot advertisements, and the rest in English (31%), targeting non-Greek reader groups as well. In respect of the location of the verbal signs in our corpus, in more than half (54%) the verbal sign is located in the lower part of the advertisement, in 31% in the middle and in the remaining 15% in the top part. Since the verbal sign is mainly positioned in the lower part of the studied advertisements, it performs what Barthes defines as *anchorage function*,²⁴ that is with view to clarifying what the iconic messages in the advertisements stand for. At the same time, it is interesting

¹⁸ Philip J. Kitchen, *Marketing Communications: Principles and Practice* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), p. 147.

¹⁹ Charles Channon, *Twenty advertising case histories, second series* (London: Cassell, 1989), p. 295.

²⁰ Victoria Welby, *What is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significance* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1983 [1903]), p. 38.

²¹ Roland Barthes. *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), p. 161.

²² Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, "Iconicity, Otherness and Translation", *Chinese Semiotic Studies* 7, no1 (2012): 20.

²³ Dominique Maingueneau, *Analyser les textes de communication* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), p. 57.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, "La rhétorique de l'image", p. 45.

to remark that, as described by Kress and Van Leeuwen, “what has been placed on the top is presented as the Ideal, and what has been placed at the bottom is put forward as the Real.”²⁵ The majority of the verbal signs placed at the bottom of our advertisements give practical and detailed information, showing and explaining ‘what is the real’ aim/purpose of ‘ideal’ iconic messages placed at the top.

Furthermore, one of the signs in an advertisement is also the logo, the role of which is to identify and build a product’s visual identity. According to Guidère,²⁶ a logo is a brand’s iconic aspect, while its name is its verbal aspect. In the advertisements under study, more than half of the logos (64%) were placed close to the advertised product (see Table 1). It is believed that advertisers choose to place logos close to the product in order to enforce the connection between them. It is also observed that logos are often used in contrast to the ephemeral iconic themes of the advertisements that change for each campaign.

		Position of logos		Total
		Not-close	Close	
Origin of the advertisement		35%	65%	100%
	Cypriot	6	11	17
		60%	69%	65%
	Foreign	45%	55%	100%
	4	5	9	
	40%	31%	35%	
Total	36%	64%	100%	
	10	16	26	
	100%	100%	100%	

Table 1. Crosstabulation of the origin of the advertisements and the position of logos.

²⁵ Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, *Reading images: The grammar of Visual Design* (New-York: Routledge, 2006), p. 186.

²⁶ Guidère, *Publicité et traduction*, p. 40.

4.2. Colour as a plastic visual sign

Another intensely cultural aspect is the plastic visual sign of colour. Hornung supports in a very simple way how colour is used in food advertisements for children to make the product look appealing and to reinforce values such as multiculturalism and egalitarianism.²⁷ Perceptions of food are also associated with colours, for example the flavour of cakes and ice creams are often anticipated from their colour²⁸.

As Van Leeuwen remarks,

[...] a quality of an object (e.g., colour) is then recognized as coming from a particular context (a particular culture, a particular historical period, a particular activity, particular group, etc.), and conveys ideas and values that are commonly associated with that context in popular culture and hence familiar to anyone who is at all exposed to mass media.²⁹

For this reason, the qualitative features of the children (such as eye and hair colour) appearing in advertisements are selected on this basis. In the food advertisements, which appeared in Cypriot advertisements, the children's eye colour is unclear in 31% of the cases, 38% seem to have brown eyes and 31% blue. Things become much clearer when it comes to the hair colour of the children. In this case, 54% have brown hair, 31% have blond hair, 8% black hair and another 7% red hair. Dark colours seem to dominate in the studied advertisements, as shown in the example (Fig. 1), where this conclusion is reflected.

²⁷ David, Hornung, *Colour: A Workshop for Artists and Designers* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2005), p. 133.

²⁸ Dawn Burton, *Cross-Cultural Marketing: Theory, practice and relevance*. London, New York: Routledge, 2009.

²⁹ Theo Van Leeuwen, *The language of colour. An Introduction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 86.



Figure 1. Cypriot print advertisement for mineral water (DDB Cyprus, TV Mania 2009, issue 803, p.43).

Furthermore, it was noted that in more than half of the advertisements the dominant colours in the compositions were black and white. This is in contrast to what Wright mentions about children's advertisements, in other words, if customers are children then a mixture of bright, happy, attractive colours might as well be the best approach in advertisements.³⁰ More specifically, black was used in 27% of the advertisements, white was used in 23%, red in 15%, blue in 11%, yellow in 8%, and brown, green and orange, each in 4% of the advertisements. The remaining advertisements (4%) used more than three colours, which were usually bright. This is very interesting since many everyday objects for children, such as toys and books are painted with bright colours, as Van Leeuwen mentions.³¹ Given that the advertisements focus on children, we expected brighter colours to be used. Van Leeuwen remarks that "black can also gain meaning, like white, it can be interpreted as *not* being a colour, as negating or suppressing the more extroverted emotionality of vivid colour, and therefore as 'restrained' or 'modest.'"³² It is, however, likely that the advertisers chose black and white not for their modest characteristics, but rather because the two colours endow an advertisement with realism. For Kitis, the black and white of the photo adds to the realism of the picture³³ and Taylor and Baldry consider that black and white also represents naturalism.³⁴ This choice may be seen as an effort to show that they are not being deceitful, especially as regards such a serious matter as children's nutrition.

³⁰ Ray Wright, *Consumer Behaviour* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), p. 121.

³¹ Van Leeuwen, *The language of colour*, p. 3.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³ Eliza Kitis, "Ads-part of our lives. Linguistic awareness of powerful advertising", *Word & Image* 13 (1997): 307.

³⁴ Chris Taylor and Anthony Baldry, "Computer assisted text analysis and translation: a functional approach in the analysis and translation of advertising texts," in *Exploring*

4.3. Facial expression and gaze as plastic visual signs

Non-verbal signs worth studying are also facial expressions (see, for example, Fig. 2) and gaze (see, for example, Fig. 3) which constitute plastic visual signs. As Nöth stated “facial expressions seem to be largely universal but are nevertheless culturally variable to a certain degree.”³⁵ It would be interesting to examine in our corpus whether facial expressions are culturally related to the Cypriots. It is observed that, in 8% of the cases, the facial expressions are unclear, while 81% of the children appearing in advertisements are smiling and 8% are calm.

A happy atmosphere is connoted by the presence of children and it also has a positive effect on how the advertised food product is perceived. This finding shows that most of our advertisements could be described as *emotional*, since, according to de Mooij, in advertising theory, emotion is used in the rough classification of advertising in “rational” or “emotional”, where emotional means feelings, pleasure or mood.³⁶

Argyle and Cook state that cultural differences in gazing behaviour appear in both frequency and length of eye contact.³⁷ The gaze direction also comes under this category, and we have ascertained that 42% of children look directly at the advertisement’s reader, whereas 58% do not. As regards the gaze, Fabbri observes that the personal and impersonal (content category) can become apparent in the way that images are organised in some cultures, through the contrast between a direct gaze and a profile shot, in the same way that the pronouns ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘he’ or ‘she’ are used in language.³⁸ Both direct and indirect communication seem to have been adopted as creative practices in the examined advertisements.

Translation and Multilingual Text Production: Beyond Content by Erich Steiner and Colin Yallop (Berlin and The Hague: Mouton, 2001), p. 296.

³⁵ Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 402.

³⁶ Marieke de Mooij, *Consumer Behavior and Culture: Consequences for Global Marketing and Advertising* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, 2011), p. 185.

³⁷ Michael Argyle and Mary Cook, *Gaze and Mutual Gaze* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976), p. 26-34.

³⁸ Paolo Fabbri, *Le tournant sémiotique* (Paris: Lavoisier, 2008), p. 118.



Figure 2. Cypriot print advertisement for fruit drink (Wellspring Trading Ltd, TV Mania 2009, issue 814, p.37).

4.4. Children's location in advertisements and family representations

The location of children and the number of faces participating in the advertisements connote meanings. As regards their location in the picture, 92% of the portrayed faces are located in the centre-front and 8% of faces to the left. This centralisation of faces in the ads is interesting as Kress and Van Leeuwen remark “[f]or something to be presented as Centre means that it is presented as the nucleus of the information to which all the other elements are in some sense subservient.”³⁹ This supports the view that location is not random, but semiotically determined, since the great majority of advertisers in our corpus choose to make the child the focal point of the iconic message, a choice that connotatively shifts weight from the product's advertisement to the child itself.

Moreover, in 50% of the advertisements, the child appears on its own, in 12% there is another child in the picture, in 30% a parent and in 12% of the cases there is one more child and another parent. In 27% of the cases, the parent is a woman, while in 23% both sexes are represented. It may be opined that when a child appears on its own, advertisers might connote his/her uniqueness for the parents, whilst when accompanied by another child could connote his/her innocence/naivety. The use of more individuals, both children and adults, connotes iconically a family atmosphere, whereupon advertisers rely to promote food for children.

³⁹ Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, *Reading images: The grammar of Visual Design*, p. 196.



Figure 3. Cypriot print advertisement for ice-cream (Regis Milk Industries Ltd, Down Town 2009, issue 142, p.81).

4.5. Typography and graphics as plastic signs

It is worth mentioning that in Barthes' classification, the verbal message is premised in relation to the iconic messages, since "writing and speech are always complete terms of informational structure"⁴⁰ and because it confronts the polysemic character of the image. Besides its information structure, writing is actuated by typography. According to Goddard, "[...] the verbal language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: in other words, writing is a form of image-making, too. It could be said to have its own paralanguage, as a result of 'clothing' the copywriter has chosen for it."⁴¹

The aforementioned position is adopted in this paper as well as the importance of typography and graphic design in the context of advertising, since both constructs visualize a mental idea, a concept, which must reach its audience successfully. There are unlimited combinations of graphic elements and any variation in the content or placement of an image or images, and in the type and space of an advertisement would lead to a different visual outcome which, in turn, would result in a different interpretation. Usually, the major constituents of a typical advertisement are: headline, caption/subheading, illustration/photograph/image, body copy, logo/symbol/name-style, slogan and name/address/website.

According to Bertin, graphic parameters contribute to the semiotic structuring and transference of meaning in design applications such as shape, scale, value (tone), texture, color, orientation and location.⁴² Through these parameters an advertisement uses specific typefaces and styles for headlines, sub-headings or body copy and we believe that these choices are essential when striving to achieve a certain tone of voice and attract a particular target audience, as in our case children and their parents.

Many researchers have examined the semiotic attributes of typography. However, studies looking specifically at typographic characteristics in the context of food advertisements for children in Cyprus are limited. Our focus is on display typography since its major role is to attract the viewer's attention. In the current study a series of typographic variables was set in respect of a visual content analysis, as described above. McCarthy and Mothersbaugh observe that typography is a function of typeface characteristics, spacing and layout and that these dimensions have semantic associations.⁴³ Because of the unlimited combinations of these dimensions, we have defined our typographic aspects based on specific typographic characteristics described by Van Leeuwen such as serif and sans serif, script,

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, "La rhétorique de l'image", p. 43-44.

⁴¹ Angela Goddard, *The Language of Advertising* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 16.

⁴² Jacques Bertin, *Semiology of Graphics* (California: Esri Press, 2011[1967]), p. 42.

⁴³ McCarthy S., M. and L., D. Mothersbaugh. "Effects on Typographic Factors in Advertising-Based Persuasion: A General Model and Initial Empirical Tests." *Psychology & Marketing* 19, no. 7-8 (2002): 663-691.



decorative, irregular, italics/slope, curvature, texture and connectivity.⁴⁴ We have also included in our coding procedure the typographic characteristics of upper and lower case to see the use of display type set in capital letters or not for this type of advertisement. It is common knowledge in typography that most of the time lower-case letters are more easily legible than upper-case letters.

This practice is noted in our results, as 85% of our adverts use lower-case characters to attract attention, 11% upper-case and 4% both. This finding, that verbal messages targeting children are written in lower-case letters, makes sense in respect of the writing and reading that kids learn at first-level elementary school classes and with which they are consequently better acquainted.

Italic writing is often used to differentiate information within running text, to signify handwriting or to assign importance to that which is written. Almost all of our adverts (92%) use roman characters, which are upright, rather than italicized or oblique, compared to 8% that use italic characters. According to Jackson “the attitude in vertical writing is natural and free whilst in sloping writing it is twisted and awkward,”⁴⁵ and this supports our previous finding as well as facilitates and supports legibility in the major part of our corpus.

In terms of typeface attributes dealing with serifs, script, decorative or irregular characteristics, we observed that most of our advertisements (73%) use sans serif letterforms, 12% use serif fonts and 15% use script writing. Interestingly, we found no advertisements using decorative or irregular typefaces, and this, in our opinion, has to do with legibility. Thus, the avoidance of complicated or confusing letterforms is expected in children’s advertisements.

This is also supported by our findings on the use of textures in letterforms: 96% are plain, flat and two-dimensional, 4% are three-dimensional and none of our advertisements use patterns within the typefaces. Sans serif roman fonts are usually a safe approach for this kind of advertisement. The use of script writing (15%) is probably based on the fact that it is associated with handwriting, and this makes the messages look more ‘child-like’. These forms of typeface may be said to add innocence and purity to the verbal messages used for targeting the buyers, who—in the selected corpus—are mainly parents or adults who have children.

In terms of curvature, we found that 77% of our adverts are using predominantly rounded letterforms and 23% angular. As Van Leeuwen remarks, “[r]oundedness can come to signify “smooth”, “soft”, “natural”, “organic”, “maternal”, and so on, whereas angularity “abrasive”, “harsh”, “technical”,

⁴⁴ Van Leeuwen, Theo. “Towards a semiotics of typography.” *Information Design Journal and Document Design* 14, no. 2 (2006): 239-255.

⁴⁵ John Jackson, *Upright Versus Sloping Writing: Being an Inquiry Into the Respective Merits of Sloping and Upright Or Vertical Writing* (London : S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington), p.6.

“masculine”, and so on.”⁴⁶ As a result, we believe that this finding enhances the messages with a friendly iconicity, thus making them more attractive and familiar to parents or adults who have children.

Looking at the letterforms’ connectivity, it is observed that 92% of the advertisements have connected and 8% disconnected letterforms. Like in script writing, as Van Leeuwen⁴⁷ remarks, connectivity is associated with handwriting and has its own metaphoric potential, while external connection might suggest ‘wholeness’, or ‘integration’ depending on how it is used and in what context. In general, the selection, size, placement and design of typefaces often add second level significations in the writing of verbal language.

5. Food advertisements and cultural values

The semiotic study has revealed valuable information about the cultural context of these Cypriot print advertisements. In fact, as Fontanille states, “the relation between *semiotic* and *cultural* is not only an inclusion [...] the cultural could generally be the operator of transformations of the semiotic.”⁴⁸ In other words the cultural produces semiotic interpretations and in this context it would be very interesting to see whether this aspect derives from our corpus.

The age groups of children in the selected sample have their own semiotic dimensions. We can see that in 8% of the advertisements children are up to one year old, in another 8% the children are between two and four years old. In 42% of the advertisements children are between four and eight years old and the same percentage (42%) exists in the group of children between eight and twelve years old. We can therefore infer that advertisers are using the age group of four to twelve years old (84%) in which other foods can be easily promoted as they might not be subject to the nutritional restrictions imposed by specialists for children up to four years old. Of course, this does not mean that parents will be more lax about the food their children in this age group eat, but, as Shimp remarks, children between the ages of 6 to 11 “[...] influence their parents’ choices of clothing and toys and even the brand choices of products such as toothpaste and food products.”⁴⁹

The values promoted in the advertisements under study constitute, in the Barthesian sense, social myths: these values are quality of life (23%), with which certain foods are closely linked; the realisation of children’s dreams (14%); health (11%), since some foods are promoted as helping children’s natural

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jacques Fontanille, “Introduction,” in *L’explosion et la culture* by Juri Lotman, translated by I. Merkoulova (Limoges: Pulim, 2004), p. 11.

⁴⁹ Terence A. Shimp, *Advertising, Promotion, and Other Aspects of Integrated Marketing Communications* (Mason: Cengage Learning, 2010), p.111.

growth, whereas other foods are less beneficial; care (2%), which parents appear to show to their children when they select the appropriate food for them; the trust (2%) they place in certain foods and the preference given to less processed and more natural foods (2%). In our opinion, the value of 'quality of life' embraces all of the aforementioned values, as the main consideration of parents is to ensure that high quality of life and a sense of security are offered to their children.

Finally, the selection of internal or external settings in the advertisements is also of semiotic interest. In particular, 62% of the studied print ads portray an internal home-environment, whereas only 38% external spaces. We see that the iconic code of the home is stronger than the iconic code of nature, because a home implies protection and security, particularly where children are concerned. Additionally, we believe that 38% of the advertisements using exterior locations reflect the Mediterranean (Cypriot) way of life, where warm temperatures allow for family activities outside of the home environment.

6. General remarks

Bignell mentions that "advertisements make use of signs and social myths which are already in circulation, and ask us to recognize and often to enjoy them."⁵⁰

The inclusion of other people in the advertising compositions, whether they are children or women or a combination thereof, and the preference shown for home environments purposely emphasizes the value of family. It is worth mentioning that family is considered to be a core value in Cyprus.

Where the typography of advertisements is concerned, we have noted that letterforms can be used connotatively, not only because of their historical and contextual background, but also because of their design, placement and layout on paper or screen. Typefaces reflect trends, styles and attitudes. They can be related to various forms of ideologies and second level significations. Typographic and layout combinations between verbal and non-verbal components in advertisements are unlimited and even the smallest alteration can play a significant role in visual interpretation.

In general, the letterforms that are used have high levels of legibility, are viewer-friendly and have similar colours and aesthetics that are not only near to what children are exposed to in their everyday life in many of their books, but also connote qualities like innocence, naivety and sensitivity to the parents. Lower case, roman, sans serif, no-textured, rounded and connected typefaces are mainly used for written language. We think that further research can be similarly carried out by incorporating additional typographic characteristics and design parameters, as well as using a bigger corpus from other areas, such as children's packaging, comics, toys and other related products.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Bignell, *Media Semiotics. An Introduction* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 31.

7. Conclusion

According to Levitt “companies must learn to operate as if the world were one large market-ignoring superficial regional and national differences.”⁵¹ However, Cannon remarks that “[...] because of the rapid impact needed from advertising, the fact that we find national associations being used, would seem to indicate a belief on the part of advertisers that such associations do serve a purpose.”⁵² We are in agreement with Cannon’s position since our study has shown that food advertisements which present young children as major participants do in fact target parents or adults who have children under their care. Within this context, advertisers adopt the practice of localization in relation to plastic signs, and in particular to the figurative features of children and their parents. However, the promoted cultural values are global and involve values such as family, security, safety and food quality.

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⁵¹ Levitt, Theodore. “The Globalization of Markets.” *Harvard Business Review* 61, no. 3 (1983): 92.

⁵² Jackie Cannon, “Supra-Nationality and Sub-Nationality in Spanish Advertising,” *in Advertising and Identity in Europe. The I of the Beholder* by Jackie Cannon, Patricia Odber de Baubeta and Robin Warner (Bristol, Portland: Intellect, 2003), p. 18.



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