

BCE Social Studies

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THESIS ARCHIVE

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The cultural and sociological associations of the Playboy phenomenon

Ph.D. Thesis Archive

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Thinking of today's popular periodicals and newspapers, even the media of the press appears rather novel, as for newspapers to operate a significantly industrialised society and a relatively developed infrastructure must exist; an assumption of literacy must be made, and to boot, the operating principle of freedom of speech must also be assumed. All of the above are characteristically a product of 19th Century Europe and United States; however, its approximate integral antecedents appeared much earlier.

Géza Buzinkay¹

I. Introduction and Justification of the Research Topic

The dissertation titled The Cultural and Sociological Associations of the Playboy Phenomenon, Internationally and in a Hungarian Context from 1953 to the Present seeks the answer to the question of whether a causal relationship can be shown between the "Playboy" lifestyle philosophy that was brought to life at the beginning of the 50s and the everpresent intellectualism advertising liberalisation in Western culture in the second half of the 20th Century. Was the young college-student who had founded Playboy right in his assessment of the factors that by today – in the form of various theories - have become accepted components of social studies discourse? Can we find an overlap between theories within the sociological literature or the values represented by the magazine? Can the philosophy of Playboy be an appropriate subject of published sociological theories? To what degree can the Playboy spirit be treated as a coherent life-philosophy? Is the Playboy philosophy a dream, or a reality? Is it a cleverly designed marketing message, capable of communicating to a wide array of people, or a phenomenon capable of releasing enormous latent tensions, the collective stifling of sexuality within ourselves? Merely making a femal nude in graphical form available to all through an available media in a given age?

To what degree does the social-cultural milieu in which abortion was considered illegal and a child outside of marriage was sin in the eyes of society, leading to tragedy, contribute to success? Was the timing accidental? Or, were the instincts within human beings inevitably slated to break through? Conceivably the subject concerns the idea that near the middle of the past century the requisite social, moral

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¹ Source: Buzinkay Géza: Kis magyar sajtótörténelem, Budapest, Haza és Haladás Alapítvány, 1993, 3. oldal

and technological conditions were met? Based on the diverse nature of the topic, it is evident that to interpret the phenomenon it is essential to undertake a detailed mapping of social, cultural, economic and technological associations.

Beyond the examination of the theoretical background of its origin, the dissertation describes the Hungarian publication of Playboy magazine. I endevour to introduce the relative lack of success of the Hungarian publication by presenting the existence of the relationship between the success of American Playboy and social conditions, using the above as a tool of evidence. All of those conditions that existed in the second half of the 20th Century in the United States are not even remotely similar to the attitudes and values of today's Hungarian society. The choice of Playboy magazine may appear a touch strange in the case of a Sociology PhD dissertation, but I believe that on the one hand the social impact of the magazine and the system of values it represents may comprise the subject of an interesting sociological study in and of itself, while on the other hand it may verify the convergence of theoretical background and practical experience.

Over and above its role as a light entertainment magazine for men, Playboy magazine played a historical role as a pioneer in freedom of speech and the sexual revolution. This is why Hugh Hefner, the founder of the magazine claims that primarily Playboy is not sought by readers for its pornographic content (he does not consider the magazine as such) but to experience the value system it represents and the lifestyle and life feeling that that system engenders. According to Hefner, with the conclusion of the sexual revolution and the Beat period, Playboy has fulfilled its own historical mission; at the same time, he maintains the viability of the value system he represents, something he believes is proven by the success - at least as experienced in America - of the magazine. [Hefner, 2001]²

According to my theory, which I wish to prove in my dissertation, Playboy magazine was born in an exceptionally fortunate historical situation, a professionally managed enterprise which constructed a very sophisticated, yet for the majority doable system of values and lifestyle model through one of the simplest communicable human need, sexuality, thereby elevating sexuality into "mainstream" media. The basic concept, according to which light entertainment and relaxation is a due of every worthwhile

² Source: Hugh M. Hefner: The Philosophy, 1955, 25. oldal, www.playboy.com latest download: September 15, 2009.

man or of course woman, including the pleasures of body and soul alike, properly managed and repackaged according to the changing fashions of the times, with perhaps a bit of repositioning, works perfectly.

In summary, when I wrote the dissertation my objective was to use my multi-year experience as a researcher and educator and my know-how in the field of media to focus attention onto an area of interest to me, namely that of printed media, specifically Playboy, a subject of study which heretofore in Hungary - in contrast with Anglo-Saxon countries - barely garnered any professional interest. I trust that this Doctoral dissertation may become the starter for many additional ideas from both scientific as well as a professional perspective.

I started to write the dissertation in February of 2003; following shorter and longer breaks, I finished it in November of 2009. Its length exceeds 200 pages.

1.1 Description of the Hypothesis

I consider the starting point of my hypothesis that the system of values and the social class that wishes to identify with that system that is represented by Playboy magazine shows a significant deviation in the United States and Hungary. Playboy was only available in limited quantities through the iron curtain, thus the readers – very different from the original target group - could only read it as a magazine with a "skewed" meaning, sweetened with the "American dream," varying from the original, dressed in a different symbolic content.

The magazine was finally published in the Hungarian language as well within a few years following the regime change; after some initial success, however, compared with the parent magazine in America it was only able to achieve a relatively low readership. Based on available data, it appears that Playboy has fulfilled it societal mission; in Hungary it cannot conquer the social strata that it was originally intended for.

My assumption is that the original target group, due to the peculiar development of Hungarian society, has never existed and the new, well heeled intellectuals of the social structure after the regime change simply did not prefer this medium. At the same time, the question arises that despite the drop that was experienced since the initial publication of the magazine, what could explain one or two exceptional record

sales spikes? Using various statistical methods and examining the data of a few group interviews, I believe that the success of these Playboy issues must be primarily sought in the past. Absolute success was ensured by that cover (depicting a woman) which enabled a recall of the good old days, its protagonist embodies the post-communist female ideal – someone everyone desired - an– then Playboy showed her in a way she has never been seen before. Those who wished to relive this feeling were willin to pay and gladly perused the pictorial made of Sarolta Zalatnay.

Within the framework of the research I examined in detail 48 issues of Playboy, published between January of 2001 and December 2004, the changes in the reader and advertising markets, through which I wished to demonstrate changes in the general reading and magazine reading habits of a portion of Hungarian society – the regular male readers of magazines. It is through these examinations that I seek the answers concerning the social and sociological situation of Playboy's readership and to the extent possible the practical derivatives of theoretical approaches.

II. Applied Methodology

2.1. Applied Quantitative Research Methods

When setting up practical research methodology, it must be seen that the reasons of Playboy's success are hardly self evident. The cliché, continuously echoed by numerous 'celebrity' media personalities, states: "You just have to make something good," poses an ever more difficult task to the editors of the magazine. Numerous factors may influence the frequency of magazine reading and the gradual changes in readership and characteristic reduction thereof³; an investigation of these factors definitely demands various research methods.

Given the subject matter of the dissertation, my objective was to use as many research methodologies as possible that I was familiar with and that I could connect with the topic, in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the processes. The success of certain issues of Playboy, given the nature of the magazine, is mostly a function of the cover; therefore I consider it worthwhile to engage in an examination of the sales data of previously published issues and their associated covers according to the following.

³ Source: KSH (Bureau of Central Statistics), 2004. olvasási szokások (readin habits), www.ksh.hu

I assigned various codes to the pictures and text appearing on the cover, and then, using an SPSS program, examined the "measurable" associations. With a few exceptions the magazine is published in a foil sheath, so there is generally no way to leaf through it at the sales location; therefore I believe that the appearance of the cover and its picture components have the most significant impact on purchasing behaviour at sales locations.

In Pierre Bourdieu's book titled Distinction⁴ he expresses his claims with the aid of correspondence graphs and demonstrates his conclusions precisely on the graphs he draws up. I believe that it is prudent to employ a similar method to show the segmentation of the magazine market and to delienate men's magazines using statistical methods. As relatively large amounts of data are required to draw up correspondence graphs, I had to look for a solution that enabled precise analysis while I could afford it. TGI's software, which processes 16,000 surveys per annum, proved to be an effective solution, having accepted the compromise of not having the database available to me, I was only able to work with the offered variables. In spite of the restriction, interesting and useful graphs were generated.

From the Hungarian Audit Bureau of Circulations (MATESZ) ⁵ I downloaded the official circulation data of men's magazines considered Playboy competitors (CKM, FHM) since their initial publication, and with the longitudinal analysis of these numbers I attempted to draw conclusions about likely changes in the segment, analysing the data of recent years. At the time of analysing the data, I took into consideration that in the case of given magazines I had a relative dearth of circulation data, so I drew my conclusions accordingly.

Within the framework of the dissertation I analyse the entertainment magazines and weeklies presently in Hungary by their geographic distribution, a graph which demonstrate the distinct segments that can be separated on the basis of demographic data. Extending the method and examining only the men's magazines, social classes possessing distinct characteristics rise to the surface.

My objective with this procedure was to obtain more precise information on defining Playboy's Hungarian base, and with this comparison support my hypothesis according

⁴ Source: Bourdieu, Pierre: Critique sociale du jugement, / Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste; (transl. by Richard Nice) 1996, Repr. London, GB: Routledge, p. 613

⁵ Source: www.matesz.hu

to which the original message of the Playboy philosophy did not get to the Hungarian audience, and in truth it is this difference that is the explanation for why the other adjectives: pornography, sexual inciter, destroyer of families, also do not fit Hungarian conditions.

2.2. In Depth Interview

Within the framework of the research an interview was conducted with the primary person responsible for the publication of Playboy: the *Editor in Chief*. Playboy is nearly synanomious with the person of its founder and still Editor in chief, Hugh Hefner. As the Editor in Chief still remains responsible for the communication of the magazine's message, I will introduce the conversation with Arpad Posa in the detail within the dissertation. Naturally, as in any other area of life, unexpected events may take place from one day to the next: Arpad Posa, Editor in Chief for many years, resigned from his post, and unfortunately I did not have an opportunity to interview the new Editor in Chief. In spite of this fact this interview supplements the hypothesis with numerous relevant bits of information.

2.3. Group Interviews

In general it may be said that the use of a group interview is useful in all such cases when no substantive changes have taken place in the structure, appearance - simplifying, the quality - of a product, in this case, a magazine, while at the same time it may be concluded that within a certain segment of society – in this case among Playboy customers – the evaluation of the magazine nonetheless changed. The explanation of the drop may be sought in the area of reader preferences as well, meaning that the magazine is still top shelf, simply what happened is that the world has moved on a bit. To define reasons and causations, I was assisted by the application of the following highlighted method from the list of quantitative research methodologies.

Within the framework of the group interviews, I investigated the combined interactions of general attitudes in connection with the magazines, the appeal of Playboy covers, and individual content elements. Altogether 6 group interviews have

been concluded, with the aid of which the opinion of the readership could be approximated. The graph drawn up using the results data from the group interviews simulates the spatial distribution of magazines based on the descriptive terms used by the readers. Based on what was said, within the framework of the dissertation, I would like to analyse and interpret those most important factors that readers associate with Playboy.

III. Discussion Results

3.1. Morality, Media

With an examination of Playboy magazine in the framework of a dissertation it is a crucial task to outline the theoretical approaches that arise and the selection of the theoretical approach which contains a sufficient degree of explanatory capability to interpret the phenomenon. As a starting point the study of the interconnection possibilities of morality and media was used. The introduction of the dissertation and its first chapter introduce the topic of the discussion, explain what has gone before, and lists those phenomena that form an integral part of the research. The objective of the first chapter is the introduction of the theoretical background and the processing of the relevant specialised literature.

The defining role of the media as experienced in the 20th Century greatly contributed to the absence of such general and accepted values in what we call a modern lifestyle that would serve as guideposts for the members of society in order to segregate good and evil on a societal level.

Competition is ever more strongly felt within the primary approach aspect of the study, mass media, within the framework of which the key objective is the maximised number of viewers/readers on a continuous basis. A consequence of this chase is that only the discussion and processing of such topics are made necessary by the given medium with its tools, which can engage the interest of an ever broadening segment of society. Consequently the public at large must face – nearly without exception – such problems that will be associated, for the most part, with deviant social behaviour,

as these provide the criteria of what is easily portrayed and may be translated into "the language of social problems: the language of popular morality." [Kitzinger, 2001] ⁶

Over the course of the dissertation I also examine the related theories of Habermas and Alexander. Among theoretical approaches it is also important to highlight one of the main argument systems of anti-pornography movements, the theory of moral panic.

3.2. Leisure Society

The above referenced theoretical approaches are all parts of the compilations that describe Playboy, but at the same time we obtain the most relevant approach of the phenomenon from a sociological perspective via the leisure society theory of Schulze. Leisure society is a product of postmodern discourse, while behind the words a kind of Weberian tradition may be discovered as well. In Max Weber's scientific theory and methodological writings⁷ a central place is occupied by the idea that the starting point of human thought is rooted in values.

According to Schulze, leisure society, which he also refers to as the society of plenty, differs from the society of scarcity, meaning the prior periods, that lifestyle has a decisive impact on one's social position. [Schulze, 2003] ⁸ This is also associated with the fact that while previously in everyday life the individual did not have an opportunity to make a choice, in today's society of plenty, even the lower classes get this opportunity. This opportunity is primarily exhibited in consumerism. This means that leisure society is also a consumer society in this interpretation. Playboy, like any other media product, or any product at all, is a product of consumer society. Consumer society (e.g. leisure society) is based on the fundamental principle that everyone may choose freely what is important to them.

The similarity between the target audience of leisure society and Playboy are much more significant, however. Schulze does not talk about desireable types of human

⁶ Source: Lajos Császi: A morál kulturális szociológiája és a média (the cultural sociology of morality and media), http://www.mtapti.hu/mszt/19994/csaszi.htm page 3.

⁷ Attila Károly Molnár: Max Weber olvasókönyv (Max Weber Primer), Novissima Kiadó, Miskolc, 1990, p.8.-28.: Tudományelmélet és módszertan (Scientific Theory and Methodology)

⁸ Source: Schulze, Gerhard: Die Erlebnisgesellschaft – Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart. Frankfurt – New York: Campus Verlag, 2003. p. 196.

beings, yet nonetheless behind the lines we can see the outline of the ideal human being of leisure society. This human ideal largely corresponds with the reader audience targeted by Playboy. Playboy openly acknowledges its liberal political views in social-political discussions. This kind of liberal perspective rather reliably outlines the circle of its consumers as well.

3.3. The American Social and Cultural Environment

In order to understand the media-historical and cultural-historical significance of the Playboy society, it is not sufficient to merely examine questions of social science and morality. To enable us to investigate the phenomenon as broadly as possible, knowledge of the historical background is also required. To accomplish this, it is not sufficient to examine the first year of the magazine's publication and we cannot rely exclusively on the social structure of the United States either. For a more in-depth understanding, it is crucial to examine the years that were prior, during and after World War II, expanding our investigation to the social, cultural and media stages of Europe.

The years between the two World Wars form a sharp boundary between the old and new world orders. World War I could be interpreted as a traditional war between colonial empires, old monarchies. In contrast with this, World War II's most important characteristic was that it affected every layer of the civilian population - children, women, the elderly, workers, etc. During World War II the woman – who formerly was responsible for the househould and in truth was considered a definitely second-class person behind the man – became a "working woman" by the conclusion of the war. Playboy could not come into being without the "working woman." This is a key development from the perspective of the magazine, the woman gained the vote, she worked, a new type of human being, a new female ideal was born. Women worked, just like their husbands, the era began that we call consumer society, and the growth of the middle class has begun.

The first so-called Kinsey report was published in 1948, in which sexologist Alfred Kinsey studied the sexual behaviour of men; it was followed by a second book in 1953 in which he studies the sexual behaviour of women. The Kinsey report and later research on sexuality tore down a mental wall in the United States. The research and

the results launched a new era; not primarily for the researchers, instead, broad swaths of society were confronted with their own habits. America meant freedom for residents and migrants. After the war, freedom gained a new meaning with the report: it was augmented with licentiousness, with this patently lusty, sexual sounding expression.

3.4. Playboy – The Magazine

A whole series of coincidences played a part in the publication of Playboy, but we cannot debate the fact that it was the idea men, Hugh Hefner and company who recognised the opportunity and precisely set up the first appearance of the first issue of the magazine. The second volume of the Kinsey report was published in 1953, television by then can be called wide-spread, as by 1952 47% of all households had a television set. These instances of momentum took the burden from the shoulders of the editor, as society was no longer the prudish society that we were presented with as late as the war years. To a certain extent we can perceive Playboy as a product of the Kinsey report, as both research and Playboy merely reinterpret our dictionary of sexual concepts, creating new sexual categories.

Alongside the detailed introduction of Playboy magazine, such additional social and cultural circumstances are presented as McCarthyism, the crisis of masculinity, and a change in visualism.

3.5. Additional Content

Chapter Three introduces the cradle of the "Playboy philosophy," meaning the social-cultural milieu as it was rooted in the United States of the 1950s. We seek the answer to the question of what combined presence of moral, technological, social and cultural conditions were required for the Playboy phenomenon to be born. Chapter Four presents the crucial history of Playboy magazine and the story of the person of Hugh Hefner. Chapter Five is a media historical aside, which wishes to present the development of Hungarian media to the reader, and points out those interactions that are crucial to the understanding of today's Hungarian media market and the Hungarian consumer attitude. Within the chapter the market for men's magazines is

analysed, including the demographic analysis of the readership of men's magazines. After the Hungarian media historical and media market aside, in Chapter Six I undertook the presentation of Playboy's Hungarian publication, and via the detailed analysis of the contents of the issues published in Hungary I wish to support the assumption expressed in the hypothesis. Within the chapter's framework the in-depth analysis of the Editor in Chief interview is also performed. Chapter Seven contains the summary of the results of the dissertation.

3.6. Conclusion

Playboy undergoes a trial by fire on a monthly basis. At the end of each month the latest issue is published with the objective meeting the expectations of already existing readers and to recruit new, enthusiastic fans for the ever shrinking pool of Playboys. The measurable of the magazine's success is the number of issues that had been sold, which show - although to a lesser extent - a continuously shrinking trend. The audience it targeted at its launch in 1953 already fought its sexual revolution and the next generation made its appearance with different needs and goals, and is not choosing to unconditionally make Playboy into the poster-boy, the agent provocateur of these goals.

The sexual revolution had ended and my opinion is that with it the golden age of the magazine ended as well. It is an undeniable fact that in America the magazine remains extremely popular and speaks to an evidently existing segment of society, but on the one hand this is not attributable to a broadening of the societal base, but rather a result of continuous, professional marketing activity, and on the other hand - an unintended occurrence by Playboy - in those countries where it speaks to a target audience that is utterly different from the original one - this marketing, built upon the Playboy philosophy, does not work on its own.

In summary, by writing my dissertation my purpose is to focus attention on an area, specifically printed media, and within this category, on Playboy, where in the framework of media research it has not yet garnered anyone's attention. The fact of the dominance of television's societal transforming power, also translating into an overwhelming degree of emphasis on television versus other media, is perfectly understandable, while at the same time by writing this dissertation I wished to introduce an area which is less well

known, thereby contributing to the cause of having as broad array of PhD dissertations as possible.

Playboy's Hungarian existence has always been defined by an association generated during the last years of socialism which significantly defines the opinion of people regarding Playboy magazine. The world has changed, however. The invention that was considered revolutionary in the fifties, Playboy, today is nearly nothing more than a still existing and arficially maintained relic of the past. What did Playboy mean? Playboy was everything that was the WEST for the Hungarian reader. The free flight of capitalism in a glimmering palace and in opulent environs with free, gorgeous women. Playboy created a world into which the hypocritical and overly moralistic twenty-something youth of the America of the fifties was glad to enter, someone who was full of ambition and a desire to act, someone who wanted to live his life differently than his war-weary, fatigued parents.

At the same time due to the advances of medical science and numerous associated scientific discoveries a true opportunity arose, for example with the widespread dissemination of birth control pills, for unrestrained sex, something that liberated young people. The intoxicating magic of relations without responsibility nearly created a new world in which Playboy led the way. Hefner realised that young people wanted to enjoy life in a way that was never experienced before, putting love in a different constellation and giving an ever greater emphasis to the importance, the primacy of a purely sexual relationship. The recipe, according to which the ladies introduced in the magazine merely contributed to the enjoyment of life with the beauty of their bodies, becoming a possible tool of men's relaxation, worked perfectly. The magazine, which started out as a scandal in the fifties, has grown to become a world-famous organ of the sexual revolution by the end of the sixties.

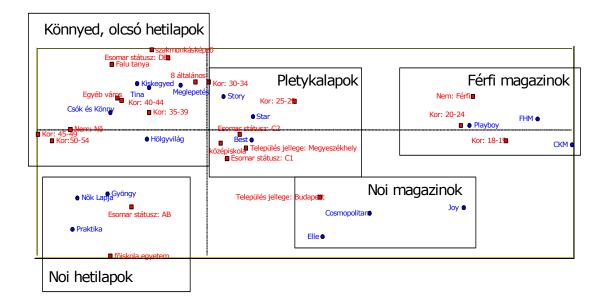
The mission of a magazine, of a cult, has ended. New products and tools appear, their role in shaping society not yet ready for definition, but one trend may be considered certain: Whereas Playboy was also capable of overcoming countless ideas and notions, numerous other factors also appeared which questioned Playboy's special nature and its values inherent in its uniqueness.

IV. Appendices

A few correspondence tables analysed in the dissertation:

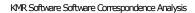
KMR Software Software Correspondence Analysis Noi, férfi heti és havilapok

Noi, férfi heti és havilapok

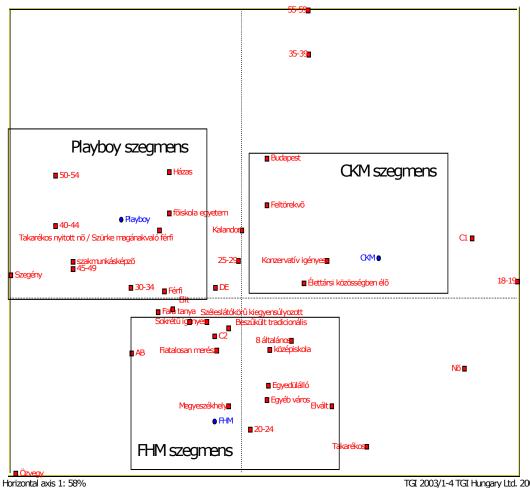


Horizontal axis 1: 57% Vertical axis 2: 19% (Total Variance: 76%) TGI 2003/1-4 TGI Hungary Ltd. 2003

Figure no. 1.: KMR Software Software Correspondence Analysis: Women's, Men's weekly and monthly periodicals



Férfi magazinok



Vertical axis 2: 42% (Total Variance: 100%)

TGI 2003/1-4 TGI Hungary Ltd. 2003

Figure no. 2.: KMR software correspondence analysis: men's magazines

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Előadás: A magyar kis- és középvállalkozások munkatársainak hulladékgazdálkodással, környezetvédelmi termékdíjjal kapcsolatos ismereteinek felmérése címmel

Publikáció: A konferencia hivatalos kiadványában, A magyar kis- és középvállalkozások munkatársainak hulladékgazdálkodással, környezetvédelmi termékdíjjal kapcsolatos ismereteinek felmérése, eredmények címmel