

# “Play to Me Gypsy!”

## How Roma Stars’ Image Change in Hungarian Media

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### Abstract

*This paper deals with the representation of media stars from the Hungarian Roma/or Gypsy<sup>1</sup> ethnic group, the largest ethnic group in Hungary: how media stars from the Hungarian Roma ethnic group modify and differentiate the public image of the Roma and how they affect the preconceptions and prejudices of the majority population regarding the Roma. There is intense prejudice in Hungarian society against the Roma who amount to 6-7 percent of the population. Researches show that when Roma people are presented in the media, they are mostly pictured as exponents of crime and/or poverty. The last two years saw the emergence of a new breed of Roma stars in the Hungarian media, though all of them represent variations of the old-time „Roma musician” stereotype, a role that is traditionally assigned to certain Roma people and ensures their partial acceptance of the majority.*

Today there are six to seven hundred thousand Roma living in Hungary (the Hungarian population is 10 million). They constitute the country’s principal and most numerous ethnic minority. The ancestors of the Roma came from India to Europe in the 15th century and they appeared in Hungary about this time. Today Hungary has the 4th largest Roma population in the world after Romania, Bulgaria and Spain. According to social researches, the Roma community is the most rejected ethnic minority group in Hungary, although in the last five years the rate of openly negative attitudes is significantly less than previously. In the last few years, nationwide representative prejudice researches show that three-quarters of Hungarians wouldn’t accept as a neighbour, let alone family member a Roma person [Székelyi-Örkény-Csepeli, 2001]. Two-thirds of society agree with the strongly racist statement that „crime is in the nature of the Roma” [Simonovits, 2005] and 40 percent of society say that „I’m averse to the Roma” [Magyar Gallup Intézet, 2003].

The typical stereotypes of the Roma often refer to negative characteristics: they don’t like to work, are uneducated, are immoral. The Roma are said to be the cause of their poverty, their problems would be solved if they started to work, the crime is in the nature of the Gypsies. And the only positive recognised group-characterisation refers to musical ability: the Roma are great musicians.

### How the Roma are Represented in Hungarian Media?

After the communist era, in the last 17 years, the image of the Roma in Hungarian media became gradually more complex. The members of the biggest Hungarian minority have got more and more present in the public sphere, but the imprint of social prejudices still manifest itself in their media representation.

In the Hungarian majority news media, the presence of the Roma increased in volume from the middle of

nineties. From that time the ethnic group has been highly visible in the news media and social discourse. However, as current content analyses about Roma representation shows much of the portrayals are stereotypical. There is a correspondence between the topics of media representation and the stereotypes present in society. Research shows that when Roma people are presented in the media, they are mostly pictured in relation to four main topics: poverty, crime, conflicts and culture [Bernáth-Messing, 2001; Bernáth, 2003]. There's less representation of the positive aspects of the Roma experience, and the problems are often presented one-sidedly and without context. In this one-dimensional media space, the Roma take all responsibility for all conflicts that arise around them.

It is an important question to observe if the majority media present the minority as an integrated group of society or not. Following their coverage by news media – after 2000 or so – the Roma also appear in entertaining and tabloid programmes. However, there is only one Gypsy character in the ever-popular Hungarian soaps, and there is only one news-anchor who is identified as a Gypsy – and he works for the least-viewed channel. Roma professionals only appear in the media in connection with Roma affairs.

There are very few Roma economists, sociologist or jurists who appear in the public sphere as experts. But there are exceptions and promising signs in public affair. In June 2007 two new Hungarian government spokespersons were employed. One of them is a member of a noted Hungarian Roma family and he speaks in interviews openly about his Roma heritages. Beside this promising sign the more popular role for Gypsies in Hungarian media is mostly the role of musician. This role is traditionally assigned to certain Roma people and ensures their partial acceptance by the majority. One of the traditional prejudices is that the Roma are great musicians and they have a sense of entertaining.

What are the attributes of Roma celebrity?

### **Characteristics of the Roma celebrity: Roma Celebrity = „Gypsy Musician,,**

The Gypsy musician is a traditional archetype of Hungarian culture. In the 19th century the only accepted element of Gypsy culture was music. Roma musicians are the ones who preserve Hungarian folk music, even in Romania, where Hungarians themselves have lived as a minority since 1918. But the Roma musician always has been subservient to the non-Roma audience. The old stereotype lives on today. Musicians are the exception, the accepted layer of the Roma population. The status of our contemporary Roma media stars is related to the stereotype of the Gypsy violonist who entertains the Hungarian people.

As David Giles says in his book, we should separate the concepts of 'fame' and 'celebrity' [Giles, 2000]. I use the term 'celebrity' when I talk about contemporary Gypsy stars in Hungary, because they are products of pop culture and mass media. There used to be 'fame' exceptions, for example Dankó Pista, who were the most known Roma before the television era. In the second part of the 19th century, the legendary composer and violin player gave more than a hundred songs to Hungarian culture.

If we look at the 45-year history of Hungarian television, we find only musicians among the very few stars who are perceived as Roma, and openly acknowledge their Roma heritage and identity. There are performers of different types of music: a group who play folk music, the other plays pop, the third group play jazz or rap. The common features of Pista Dankó and the contemporary stars are entertaining the majority population. They have colorful lifestyle and vast popularity.

In the last two-three years, people who are perceived as and acknowledge as belonging to the Roma minority have got much more emphasis in the public sphere and the Hungarian media, at least partly thanks to two televised entertainment shows. Both of these series („Megasztár” and „Győzike Show”) are adaptations of British and American series (Megasztár is a competition for singers based on “Pop Idol” and „American Idol”, while “Győzike Show” is a reality soap like „The Osbournes”). Both of these series achieve very high audience ratings.

Today in Hungary the most known Roma stars are pop musicians, including celebrities of Megasztár. In 2004 two of the three finalists were Roma (but the winner was the third contestant, herself belonging to a minority, being visibly obese). In 2005, the overall winner was a member of the ethnic group.

It's interesting to note that while the Roma amount to 6-7 percent of the population, since the dawn of commercial television in Hungary (1997), there appeared only one recognizably Roma character in the most popular soap operas [Bernáth-Messing, 2001]. She is Nóra Balogh, a careerist attorney in the daily soap “Among Friends” that has been broadcast from 1998. The actress who plays her does not belong to the Roma minority – at least she never mentioned that she had Roma origins.

## Methodology: Representation Analysis of the Two Most Known Roma Stars

In this paper I'll analyse media representation of two of the most popular Hungarian Roma stars. I'll make text-analysis, I'll analyse the audience's attitudes towards them and the producing methods of the shows. I do not intend to demonstrate causal connection regarding the ethnicity and the representation of these stars, I simply present the attributes in the media representation of two of the most popular Roma media stars. I also demonstrate that among these attributes we can emphatically find the stereotypical qualities that the majority society attributes to members of the Roma minority.

According to the press monitoring database of Observer Budapest Inc., three-quarters of all articles about Győzike and Caramel appear in tabloid newspapers and magazines. I chose the two most read weekly tabloid magazines (Story and Best), and the second most read tabloid daily (Színes Bulvár Lap) and analysed the discourse three months of articles: March, April and May, 2005. This period was important for both of the stars, because at the time started the reality show with Győzike and Caramel won the Megasztár competition. I labelled the articles based on topics content.

I've made an interview with the producer of Győzike Show and I've also made an online survey on the most popular Hungarian online portal (Index.hu) about the audience's attitudes regarding stars<sup>2</sup>. 7300 persons answered the questionnaire. 49 percent were women, 51 percent were men but they aren't representative of the sociodemographic parameters of the Hungarian population. They are more educated and younger than society in general (67 percent of the online sample has degree, the average age is 31 years).

### Most Popular Person in Hungary: Győzike

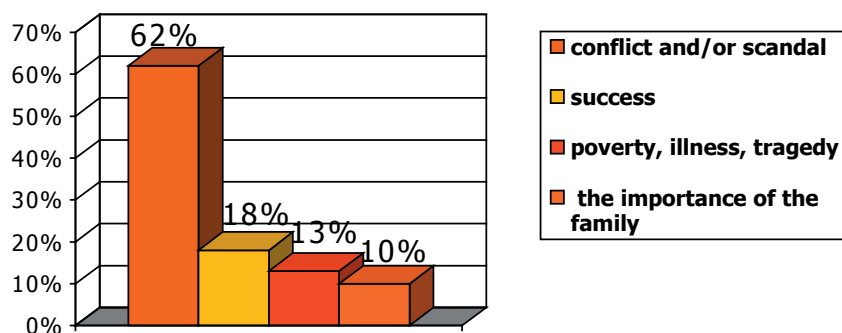
The most successful Gypsy person in the history of Hungarian television is Győző Gáspár, the protagonist of the Győzike reality show. Győzike Show, an adaptation of The Osbournes, started broadcasting in February, 2005. The weekly show is based on the life of Győzike, his wife and their two daughters.

Győzike is a 32 years old pop singer/rapper, son of a rich entrepreneur. His stardom started with a celebrity reality show in 2003, when he was a contestant on Hungarian Big Brother VIP. After that, RTL Klub, the leading Hungarian commercial television network, chose him to be the protagonist of the first Hungarian celeb-reality show. The show became one of the most viewed programmes in 2005. One particular episode had 2,7 million viewers (Hungary's population is 10 million, Budapest's population is 2 million.) According to audience researches today he is the most known celebrity in Hungary. It is an interesting situation because he is a member of the most rejected ethnic group and at the same time he is the most known person in the country.

In the 3-month press sample I analysed 115 issues. Győzike was present on 41 of these 115 covers (It is 36 percent of the covers). There were articles about him in about 60 percent of the issues, 68 articles overall.

The main topics of these 68 articles were conflicts, success, poverty, illness, the importance of the family, family tragedies, the relationship between Győzike and the Hungarian Roma community. These topics are among of the typical stereotypes of the Roma.

In 36 articles (53% of all) conflicts and/or scandals occurred: conflicts between family-members, attacks because of the show or because of the exhibitionist and luxurious life of the family, a scandal because of Győzike's relationship with a prostitute, and conflicts with Roma organizations who said that the show hurts the Gypsy ethnic group's situation.



12 articles mention success (18 %): the extremely high ratings of the show, how Győzike emerged from poverty and a new recording contract.

9 articles dealt with poverty, some kind of illness or family tragedy (13%): Győzike's stomachache because of his diet, Győzi's poor childhood, abortions of his wife, 7 articles dealt with the importance of the family (which is a perceived attribute of members of the Roma ethnic group) (10%)

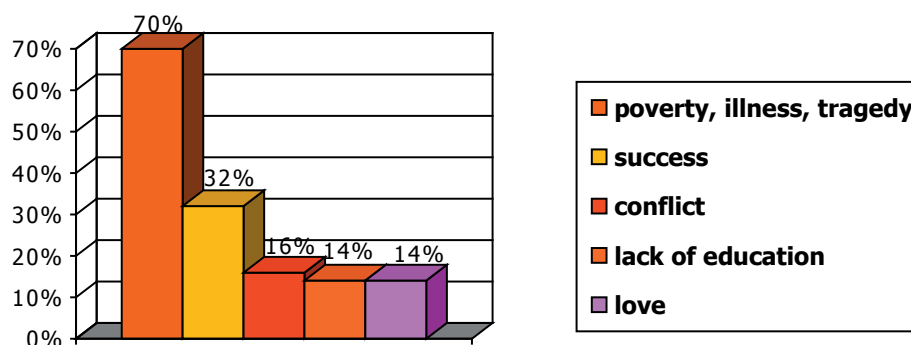
6 articles concentrated on Győzi's belonging to the Roma ethnic group itself (9%, mostly regarding conflicts)

The results of the survey have shown that even highly educated people think that Győzike's life with scandals, conflicts is a typical Gypsy-life. One-third of the sample agreed with the allegation „Győzike has a typical gypsy lifestyle” and one-third of the sample agreed with the allegation „Győzike's TV personality is the same as his real life personality.” Only 2 percent said that the character has talent, 58% said that he is popular because he loves scandals. 59 % said that he is popular because he is so irritating that make people curious. This result shows that in Győzike's case the life created by producers interlocks with the life of the ethnic minority group.

## Caramel

He is the winner of the second series of Megasztár, 24 years old. Even his name refers to the colour of his skin. He appeared on the cover of 25 of the 115 issues (this is 22% of all covers) and there was an article about him in 37 percent of the sample.

The main topics of the articles about Caramel are the following: poverty, illness, or family tragedy is mentioned in 26 articles (70% of all the articles). These articles deal with his spinal hernia and tell his life story. At the centre of the narrative is a boy living in miserable conditions, who emerges with the help of music and becomes an idol. We learn from the articles that Caramel comes from a very poor family, he grew up in a rural



segregated Roma community, and his life was full of family tragedies (his father is a criminal, his stepfather left the family, his younger brother died in an automobile accident, he became unable to work because of his spinal problems) and then he found music. This life also touches the audience. 40 percent of the sample said that they like Caramel. Success and the music as the only possibility of prosperity appear in 12 articles. In these articles Caramel appears as an ideal for Roma, who – because he has no education, and on the other hand has spinal hernia – is not able to work, and only the music is available for him. 6 articles discuss some kind of conflicts. In 5 articles his lack of education appears. Finally, there is a romantic relationship, love in 5 articles.

Media represents the poor young man as the ideal of Roma, emphasizing in every appearance the details of the boy's original poverty and the personal prosperity by means of music.

## Summary

Stuart Hall identifies three basic representative image of Black characters in 19th century's American and British fiction and popular literature. He writes about the „native”-figure, the „slave”-figure and the „clown” or „entertainer”-figure. „In this period, the very idea of adventure became synonymous with the demonstration of the moral, social and physical mastery of the colonisers over the colonised. Later, this concept of „adventure” – one of the principal categories of modern entertainment – moved straight off the printed page into the literature of

crime and espionage, children's books, the great Hollywood extravaganzas and comics. There, with recurring persistence, they still remain. (...) They have been distanced from us, apparently, by our superior wisdom and liberalism. But they still reappear on the television screen." [Hall, 2003] The common factor in clown characters that they entertain the majority, as Hall call them, The Others. „This captures the „innate” humour, as well as the pshysical grace of the licensed entertainer – putting on a show for the Others. It is never quiet clear wheter we are laughing with or at his figure: admiring physical and rhythmic grace, the open expressivity and emotionality of the „entertainer”, or put off by the clown stupidity.” [Hall, 2003] There are parallelism between basic images of 19. century's Black representation and Hungarian Gypsy image. The Gypsy musician who entertains the non-Gypsy majority is a traditional archetype of Hungarian culture. Today the most known Hungarian celebrity is a Roma person.

The representation is also determined by the fact that tabloid media covers all topics that differ from the average, puts a premium on news that are connected to scandals, that are extreme. In the case of Győzike – as can be expected from The Osbournes's adaptation – the scandal is one of the most important components of the show. He is the best known person of Hungary and he is a par excellence celebrity: the human pseudo event, a person who is well-known for his well-knownness [Boorstin, 1971].

In the most read news papers and in the most viewed programmes we can see Gypsies as uneducated persons in misery, poverty, and illnesses, with conflicts and scandals. They are members of a minority group who are almost unseen (invisible) in other roles in the Hungarian media. There are attempts in Hungarian media to "produce" presenters. Both the public television, and one of the commercial television channels started a project to present Roma television personalities. Education in public television is actually going on, five Roma journalists are studying, but it is not known yet that in what a way they can find an employment in big television companies. In the project of commercial television few result can be seen both in practice, and on the screen: from the two youngsters selected from many hundred of Roma applicants, one delayed his education because of his university studies, and the other is assistant editor of a tabloid-programme.

Qualitative and quantitative researches analyse the prejudice against the Roma show that the negative attitude can be revised if the antagonistic relationship between the Roma and successness ceases in public thinking. Minority studies say the mass media can make the situation better. The context of success can affect attitudes regarding the minority if it shows its members as having success but not in stereotypical minority images [Székelyi-Örkény-Csepeli, 2001]. It should be highlighted that the presented representations of two successful members of the minority group, which stereotypically unsuccessful in life, are different. In one case scandals and conflicts, in the other poverty, illnesses, and the way to emerge from these situations, music play an emphasized role.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the last few years the Roma people in public sphere and Hungarian Roma organizations made efforts to use the term 'Roma' in the public speech instead of the term 'Gypsy', because of the term negative connotation. The 'rom' means 'human'. Whereas, not every Roma community use the 'Roma' term for themselves. So in the paper I will use the terms as if they were equal.

<sup>2</sup> With Andrea Viniczai, April 2007.

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**Please mention the bibliographic information when referring to this book:**

*History of Stardom Reconsidered*. Edited by Kari Kallioniemi, Kimi Kärki, Janne Mäkelä and Hannu Salmi. Turku: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2007. (Available as an eBook at <http://iipc.utu.fi/reconsidered/>)