

Consumerism and gender in children's television

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Chan, K. (2012) Consumerism and gender in children's television, in M. Gotz and D. Lemish (Eds.) *Sexy Girls, Heroes and Funny Losers: Gender Representation in Children's TV around the World* (pp. 169-180), Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, ISBN 978-3-631-63319-9

Acknowledgements: This study was fully supported by a research grant from the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television at Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation, Munich, Germany.

This is the version submitted to the editors. The final published version may have some differences with this version.

Published June 2012

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Abstract

An international sample of 136 hours of children's television programming from 6 countries, predominantly in English, was analyzed to identify and characterize each instance of explicit consumption activity portrayed in the program. The types of products and services portrayed as well as sex of the users were tabulated. Types of product category used by females and males were compared. Qualitative analysis was conducted to identify dominant themes about girls' and boys' consumption activities and values. How consumption values are embedded in children's TV programs were illustrated. Issues surrounding consumption values such as materialism were discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

A school bus carried a class load of enthusiastic elementary school students to the Central Town. Mikan, a ten-year old girl growing up in rural Japan, made her first trip to an urban shopping venue. She found the modern shopping mall amazing and incredible. She surveyed all the cool stuff at the shops and exclaimed, "Everything here just looks so much fun!" The episode no. 10 titled "So happy, Central Town" of Alice Academy, a Japanese animated drama, described the shopping mall as a heaven where people can encounter all sorts of products that claim to make them happy.

This is one of the many scenes in children's television programs that communicate about consumption values such as "possessions will make you happy".

Television is a major socializing agent in children's lives and often competes with other traditional socializing agents such as the family, school, peer groups, community and religious institutions (Lemish, 2007). A popular view of socialization is that it enables children to fit into the society in which they live through learning socially appropriate behaviors. Through socialization, a child learns about the value system considered appropriate in his or her culture, and adopts the appropriate perceptions of the self and others (Lemish, 2007).

Television is an important socializing agent for children because children, though

they may not be aware of it, rely heavily on the mass media to teach them about their environment and its social norms. For instance, young people's perceptions of social relationships are influenced by consumption images. A study asked children and adolescents to choose the pictures from a pool of typical advertising visuals that best depicted "the couple most in love", the most romantic scene, and the most romantic dinner. The findings indicated that romance was framed in consumer terms. Eating in a restaurant before going out for a movie was considered as a typical date. Eating in a high class restaurant and purchasing luxury goods, however, were considered more romantic (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Young consumers also express their interest in adult products. Teenage girls were keen to try out cosmetic surgery to enhance their eyes, lips, chins, or ears in order to look like the women on television (Quart, 2003). As the media feeds the audience constantly with images of both sexes, and messages about consumption experience of men and women, it is very likely that these images will have impact on consumption values of the audience (Gauntlett, 2008).

The current study was conducted to investigate how consumption and consumption values are portrayed in children's television programs. The research objectives were,

1. to examine what types of products and services are portrayed in children's television programs;
2. to examine the gender difference, if any, of products and services

portrayed in children's television programs; and

3. to examine how consumption is represented in the storytelling in children's television programs.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Altogether 135.5 hours of children's television programming from Australia, Hong Kong, Kenya, New Zealand, South Africa and the U.S.A. (which were the programs in the larger sample that broadcasted mainly in English) were taped in May and June 2007. This was part of a larger research project that investigated gender portrayal in children's television programs in 24 countries (International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television, 2008). Altogether, 123 hours were programs in English. The remaining 12.5 hours were children's programs in Cantonese (a Chinese dialect) from Hong Kong. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in analyzing the sample.

The quantitative content analysis examined the consumption activities portrayed in the children's programs. Only dramatic content was included; commercials and program trailers were excluded. The unit of analysis was each instance of consumption explicitly portrayed in the program. An instance of explicit consumption was defined as a character in the program buying, selling or consuming a consumer product (e.g. buying a package of candy) or a consumer service (e.g. riding a bus or

visiting a theme park). Consumption is embedded in all parts of human activities. So, it is often difficult in identifying an instance of consumption. For example, all human characters in our sampled television programs are clothed. So, clothes are consumed. However, these activities were not coded as instances of consumption in the current study because of its implicit nature. The content analysis only covers those activities when consumption of goods and services becomes the foreground of the story. So, playing with friends in the garden is not considered as a consumption activity but playing with a piece of toy is considered as a consumption activity. Activities that are usually free of charge were not coded as consumption activities. Industrial or business consumption (e.g. buying a computer for a company) were excluded in the current study.

For each consumption activity identified in the television program, the product category, the age and sex profile of the product user, the consumption context, the presence of peers or family members, types of reward, and the appearance of brand name were coded. The coding frame was developed from a study of a Chinese cartoon program for children (Xia, Chan, & Chan, 2004). This book chapter reported findings on the product category and the sex profile of the product users only.

The sample was coded by a research assistant recruited for the study. The author independently re-coded 25.25 hours of the programming (19 percent of the sample).

The inter-coder reliability for each variable was quantified in terms of the percentage of agreement between these two judges. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion and negotiation. The 0.85 minimum acceptable level of divergence suggested by Kassirjian (1977) was employed. Inter-coder reliability for all of the variables was in the range 0.85 to 0.89.

Six television programs with the highest number of consumption activities were analyzed further using qualitative methods. The qualitative content analysis attempted to examine how boys and girls are portrayed in various consumption activities. We also examine how consumption values are integrated in different types of children's television programs. Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison analysis method was used to explore the embedded dominant themes throughout the analysis to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting statements (Strauss, 1987).

RESULTS

Quantitative content analysis

Altogether 521 instances of consumption were portrayed in the 135.5 hours of children's programming studied. On average, there were 3.8 instances of consumption featured in each hour of children's programming (excluding advertising). The programs shown in the United States had the highest frequency of 5.1 consumption

activities per hour. The frequency was lowest in the programs from Kenya (2.7 consumption activities per hour).

Altogether there were 154 different television programs in the sample (two or more episodes of the same program were classified as one program). Consumption activities were unevenly distributed among the programs. Two-thirds of the programs portrayed one, two or three instances of consumption. These programs accounted for 34 percent of the consumption instances. The remaining one third of the programs (those with at least four instances of consumption) contained 66 percent of the consumption activities. “Alice Academy”, a Japanese cartoon program broadcast in Hong Kong, portrayed 22 instances of consumption.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 521 consumption activities. Consuming food and/or beverages was the activity most commonly featured. It contributed more than one third of the total activities. Other frequently presented activities were playing with toys (14 percent), consuming entertainment (9 percent), visiting retail shops (8 percent), and using household or personal goods (7 percent). These top four product categories accounted for 61 percent of all the consumption activities.

Food and beverages are probably the first product categories that children come to know about, as this product category fulfills their basic needs. Toys, as the second

most frequently featured product category, indicated the importance of having fun in children's lives. Toys are often featured in pre-school educational programs as teaching and learning aids. For example, toy train cars were used to teach color patterns. A train with alternating blue and yellow cars was presented. Children were asked which color car should go next.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Among the 521 consumption activities, 359 featured human characters as product users. Table 2 summarizes the types of product category of these 191 consumption activities by sex of the product users. Among the 359 consumption activities featuring human characters, a majority portrayed males and females consuming the product or the service together. Another 191 consumption activities featured males only or females only as product users. Chi-square statistical test indicated that males and females were portrayed differently in the types of product category they used (Chi-square value=26.4, df=13, p=0.02). Males were more likely to consume food and beverages, computers, transport services, as well as personal services in the television programs than females. Females were more likely to consume clothing and toys in the television programs than males. None of the consumption activities featured girls only consuming computers or computer accessories.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Types of product categories consumed by males and females showed a statistically significant difference. Girls and women were more likely to be portrayed as the product users of clothes than boys and men. Boys and men were likely to be portrayed as the product users of computers and accessories, as well as media products. The sampled television programs often featured females as users of clothing and accessories who bought these goods to enhance physical beauty. The result supports the feminist criticism of portraying the woman as an object and a consumable item who has to increase her desirability with a right set of products and lifestyles (Wilska, 2005). The absence of females only as users of computers and accessories seems to undermine girls' interest and competence in the usage and the purchase of technical products. The result supports previous observation that the consumption styles of young boys are characterized by an emphasis on technology and leisure time equipment (Wilska, 2005). The gender difference in user profiles reported in this study was consistent with the finding from a study of store visits of urban Chinese children that girls were more likely than boys to have visited clothing stores in the past month, and boys were more likely than girls to have visited computer stores and cyber cafes in the past month (Chan, 2005).

Qualitative content analysis

Six television programs in the sample portrayed 12 or more instances of consumption, including “Alice Academy” (broadcast in Hong Kong), “Max and Ruby” (broadcast in USA), “Sesame Street” (broadcast in USA), “Cinderella” (broadcast in Hong Kong), “Hannah Montana” (broadcast in Australia), and “Blue’s Clue” (broadcast in USA). These first three programs featured 22, 15, and 13 consumption activities respectively. The next three programs each featured 12 consumption activities. In the following paragraph, we are going to describe the story outlines and describe how consumption values were portrayed in the programs.

“Alice Academy” is a Japanese cartoon series dubbed into Cantonese and broadcast in our sample in Hong Kong for elementary school age children. Each episode of the program lasts about 28 minutes. Mikan is the protagonist of the story. She is a cute, energetic, and good-natured ten-year old with magical power called Alice Power. She studies in the Alice Academy. One episode titled “So happy, Central Town” opened with a narration explaining that students of the Alice Academy received a variable monthly allowance that was linked to their school performance. Students often shopped with the allowance in the Central Town. Central Town had a variety of specialty shops, including a bakery, a stationery shop, and shops selling clothing. Mikan wanted desperately to go there. She said, “I am so excited to go shopping in Central Town. I can’t wait to get there”. Mikan was fascinated by the

products shown in the shops, such as a magic pillow that could yield romantic dreams. Her allowance of five rabbits was far from sufficient to get any of her dream products. A magical pillow would cost 5000 rabbits and a dress would cost 300 rabbits. She kept on saying, “I want this...it is so cute... I really want to get this...but it is too expensive.” She became very upset after spending her money on an apple. She said, “I have no money, therefore, no hope.” A classmate bought a box of candy that was described as the most popular snack in town. It was soft and tasty, and people would feel happy when eating it. Mikan could not wait for another month’s allowance and try the product. She wanted it right now. She offered to do body massage or polish shoes in order to earn money for the candy. With the help of her classmates, she performed a skit of Danish author H.C. Andersen’s story “The Little Match Girl”. The street show enabled Mikan to earn enough money to buy the candy. She commented that the candy tasted superb because it was bought with her own effort. The program introduces a variety of products and services, including stationeries, beddings, plants, snacks, clothing, matches, body massage, shoe-polishing, a clown performing on the street, and a drama performance. The content shows the prices of some of the products and compares the prices with Mikan’s allowance.

“Glorification of consumption” was identified as a dominant theme. Girls were portrayed as enthusiastic consumers who were fascinated by cute and fun stuff. Girls

were also interested in products related with romance. The excitement of possessing the products and the frustration of not possessing them are expressed verbally.

Materialistic values are communicated, as material possessions are linked with happiness and possessions play a central role in the children's life in the television program (Richins and Dawson, 1992).

“Max and Ruby” is an animated cartoon series produced in the United States and broadcast in our sample in USA. Max is a determined three-year-old bunny, living with Ruby, a smart, goal-oriented seven-year-old. In the episode titled “Ruby’s Beach Party”, Ruby and her friends wanted to enjoy a beach party near a pile of sand in the backyard. Max and his friend Morris were playing with toy dump trucks. Ruby tried to get Max and Morris away from the sand by offering them other toys, such as a screaming alien gorilla, a baseball and baseball glove, and a toss-a-ring toy. In another episode titled “Super Max to the Rescue”, Max played with his toys at home, including a stuffed elephant, a train set, a toy bus, and staging blocks. Max envisioned himself as a super-hero, rescuing his toys when they were in trouble. Ruby and her friends took their toys to the backyard to set up a circus performance. Each of her toys has a role to play. The Jack-in-the-box would be the clown, the doll Emily would be the star acrobat, the walkie-talkie bear would be the dancing bear, and the one-monkey band would be the orchestra. Ruby tried to find a role for the stuffed

elephant. Finally, the stuffed elephant saved the doll Emily when she accidentally fell out of a tree. Again, the dominant theme of “glorification of consumption” was communicated. Toys were portrayed as agents for excitement, empowerment, and exemption from boredom. Both boys and girls were portrayed as active toy players in the program.

“Sesame Street” is an educational program for pre-schooler and kindergartener broadcast produced as well as broadcast in the United States. One episode featured a special topic on food. It opened with Big Bird, Elmo and Telly visiting a restaurant. Elmo introduced the different types of food that children from different cultures eat; and how they ate it. A Chinese girl, for example, was shown eating a bowl of rice with chopsticks. The consumption activities served as a backdrop that introduced the topic on food. No obvious theme on consumption values was communicated.

“Cinderella” is a Japanese cartoon series dubbed into Cantonese and broadcast in our sample in Hong Kong for elementary school children. In an episode titled “Artist Jo”, the two sisters of Cinderella hired professional artists to draw portraits of them to be presented to the prince. As they are not satisfied with the work, they send Cinderella to search for Jo, a famous artist, for more presentable images. In another episode titled “Robbers”, Cinderella’s mother went to town and buys a beautiful hat. She boasted that one of her daughters would be selected as the prince’s bride. A

number of tradesmen, including tailors and jewelry-makers, were eager to offer their services to Cinderella's family. The program introduced a dominant theme of the importance of consumer products and services to improve the physical appearance of girls in order to attract the attention of the boys.

"Hannah Montana" is an American television series for teenagers broadcast in our sample in Australia. Miley Stewart, the program's main character, is a typical teenage school girl by day and a famous pop singer named Hannah Montana by night. The episode sampled was titled "It's a Mannequin's World". It was about Miley's father Robbie buying a childish outfit for Miley as a birthday present. It was a cute pink jumper with a mouse head in the front and a long tail at the back. Miley found it embarrassing to wear the jumper at her birthday party. However, she did not want to tell her dad the truth as it would hurt his feelings. At the birthday party, two classmates attempt to get a picture of Miley in her cute outfit in order to disgrace her. She finally got up the courage to confront them saying, "I love this sweater because it was given to me by someone that I care about very much." There are altogether 12 consumption activities shown in the episode, of which seven were about buying clothes. Girls were featured shopping together at the mall for cool outfit and her dad was featured as a consumer who shopped for clothing as presents.

A dominant theme identified was the conflict between the consumption values of adolescents and adults. Selecting cool products vs. selecting cute products was the focus of dramatic split between teenagers and adults. Studies have confirmed that clothing is used among teenagers to confer status to the owner and to symbolize group identity and a sense of belonging to a certain group (Jamison, 1996). It has been shown in laboratory experiments that clothing brands were associated with self-identity for both third graders as well as seventh and eighth graders (Chaplin & John, 2005). The Hannah Montana episode supports the idea that clothing is an important consumer product for self-expression especially among teenager girls. The script suggests that clothing can enhance or exploit social relationships.

“Blue’s clue” is an American pre-school educational program broadcast in our USA sample. In the episode analyzed, toys such as a pail, a shovel, and a staging block are used as teaching and learning aids in introducing concepts of gravity. A bicycle, a scooter, a toy car, and a skateboard introduce driving skills such as pushing a pedal and turning a steering wheel. The program also showed how to use a tape-recorder by pressing one button for recording and another button for play-back. Altogether 12 consumption activities were featured, most involving the use of toys. No obvious theme on consumption values was communicated.

Gender differences in consumption activities and consumption values are demonstrated in the above qualitative analysis. Stories about the purchase of clothing are reserved for girls only while boys are featured as product users of toys. Girls are concerned about the social acceptance of their purchase while boys are concerned about the hedonic aspect of the consumption. These results reinforced our arguments about gender differences observed from the quantitative content analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the portrayal of consumption and consumption values in children's television programs in a cross cultural context. The quantitative and qualitative content analyses generated three major findings. First, the portrayal of consumption activities in children's television programs was unevenly distributed among the countries and programs sampled. Consumption in children's programs most often featured food, toys, and entertainment, indicating the important of basic needs and play in children's lives.

Second, there was no statistical difference in terms of proportion of males or females featured as product users in television programs for children. However, there were significant differences in types of product categories used by females only and males only in television programs for children. Females were more likely to be associated with clothing and males were more likely to be associated with media and

computers. Females seek for social acceptance in their purchases and consumption while males looked for enjoyment and excitement in their purchases and consumption.

Third, consumption values were more likely to be featured in programs for older children. In programs for pre-school children, consumption activities were mainly peripheral, supporting the story. Consumption activities were used to teach certain concepts or skills, but consumption values were seldom featured explicitly.

Consumption values did, though, make up a core part of the programs for older children and teenagers.

To conclude, television programs in different countries carried consumption activities to different extent. In programs for younger children, consumption of products and services were used as means. In programs for older children, consumption of products and services were embedded in the stories to communicate certain consumption values. Three dominant themes about consumption values were identified, including glorification of consumption, the conflict between children and adults on consumption values, and the importance of consumer products in enhancing physical beauty of females. Both qualitative and quantitative studies show gender difference in consumption activities and values portrayed in the television programs for children.

Consumption and consumption values play an important role in children's

television programs. Such programs presumably have a strong influence on consumer socialization through modeling and reinforcement. The gender differences demonstrated in the quantitative content analysis and qualitative theme analysis supported the feminist criticism of portraying the woman as an object as well as a consumable item.

Of course, content analysis alone is limited as a research protocol because it generates no information about how the audience interprets the content. Future studies might profitably use focus group interviews or personal interviews to investigate how children and their parents read the social and symbolic meanings of the consumption behavior portrayed in television programs for children.

Table 1. Characteristics of the consumption activities (N=521)

Characteristics	Frequency	%
<i>Product category</i>		
Food and beverages	155	30
Toys	72	14
Entertainment (e.g. theme park)	48	9
Retail shops	44	8
Household and personal goods	38	7
Personal services (e.g. tuition, medication)	37	7
Traveling/airlines/transport	34	7
Media and media related products (e.g. watching movies)	34	7
Clothing	31	6
Computers and accessories	10	2
Telecommunications services	8	2
Animals or plants	4	1
Automobiles and fuel	2	0
Others	4	1
Total	521	101*
<i>Sex of product users (for human characters)</i>		
Males and females	163	46
Females only	102	28
Males only	89	25
Unidentified	5	1
Total	359	100

* does not add up to 100 percent due to rounding

Table 2. Product category by sex of product users (males only and females only)

Product category	males only	females only
	(n=89)	(n=102)
	%	%
Food and beverages	35	23
Toys	6	12
Entertainment (e.g. theme park)	7	7
Retail shops	5	9
Household and personal goods	6	7
Personal services (e.g. tuition, medication)	16	9
Traveling/airlines/transport	7	4
Clothing	3	18
Media and media related products (e.g. watching movies)	8	5
Computers and accessories	5	0
Telecommunications services	1	4
Animals or plants	2	2
Automobiles and fuel	1	0
Others	1	2

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