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‘You can’t buy friends, but...’

**Children’s perception of consumption and
friendship**

You can't buy friends, but many consider the first impression. So, unfortunately, the way you look may help.

Isabell, 12 years old

The purpose of this article is to explore, and compare, the perceived association between economic resources and peer relationships among two age groups of Swedish tweens. The tweens concept, often referring to children between 7-12 years old, was crafted in the 1980s by North American marketers (Cook and Kaiser, 2004). The characteristics connected to the transformation during the tween period, from being a small child to becoming almost a teenager with more economic resources, more pressure to consume and more power over their own consumption, makes tweens an attractive market group and an important focus for investigation (Lundby, 2011). A number of researchers have sought to examine the role of economic resources and consumption in childhood (e.g. Cook, 2009; Damay, 2008; Kochuyt, 2004; Schor, 2004; Seiter, 1993). It is well known that peer relationships are crucial to tween's development of self-image (Kratzer et al., 2009; Molenmaker et al., 2008), and that economic resources can be an important mean to attract friends and to avoid bullying (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Ridge, 2011; Olsson, 2011). However, the questions if and how children actually perceive economic resources as a mean to attract friends have not been sufficiently answered (cf. Bachmann et al, 1993; Pugh, 2009). This is the issue that the present study attempts to approach. More specifically, the two central questions in this article are: To what extent do Swedish tweens, at the age of 9 and the age of 12, perceive economic resources as a mean to attract friends? And, the extent that they do so, how do they perceive that economic resources can preferably be used in order to attract friends? The answers to these questions have the potential to provide a basis for further studies about increasing economic inequalities (Salonen, 2011). In order to fully understand the social consequences of not being able to consume to the same extent as peers, in a society where everyday life is strongly influenced by consumption, we must know more about how the mechanisms of economic resources and social inclusion are viewed through the eyes of children. Children may be most vulnerable to the internalisation of materialistic values if they experience peer pressure for having "cool" or "appropriate" things, and if

they believe that they can use material goods to become more popular and accepted (Dittmar, 2011).

Theory and research into children as consumers

Peer relationships are fundamental in children's everyday lives (Bukowski, Newcomb and Hartup, 1996; Krappmann, 1996), and children often mention kindness as the most important element in friendship (Wærdahl, 2003; Lundby, 2012). However, one way of expressing kindness seems to be through consumption. Through gift-giving, relationships may be created, strengthen, and maintained (Chin, 2004; Lundby, 2012). Thus, children's social life with peers may be interpreted as a symbolic interaction, where relations and identity construction are contested and explored, partly through the use of consumer goods (Mead, 1976; Pugh, 2009).

One highly influential factor to children's interpretations of consumption is peer pressure. Some researchers even argue that peers are the most powerful, and unregulated, influence on children's consumer behaviour (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Pilgrim and Lawrence, 2001). As children move into early adolescence, groups as a context for peer interaction, become increasingly important (Vasta et al 2004). Consequently, consumer socialization may be viewed as a developmental process that take place at different stages as the child grows older. According to Roedder John (1999), in the *analytical stage* (age 7-11), important consumer development takes place, resulting in more symbolic thinking and a more abstract understanding. As earlier research demonstrates, children at this age are often well aware of the symbols and status associated with different forms of consumption, and may use 'appropriate' possessions in order to achieve popularity and a sense of community in the peer group (Banerjee and Dittmar, 2008; Pugh, 2009; Roper and La Niece, 2009). At this stage children also tend to develop more materialistic values and are able to take in others' perspectives, but not simultaneously as their own (Roedder John, 1999).

In the *reflective stage* (age 11- adult), cognitive and social skills are more sophisticated, and children's need to shape their own identity and to fit into the peer group, becomes significant (Roedder John, 1999). Children around the age of twelve often use their consumer knowledge to creatively and skilfully construct their unique

identity and to fit into their peer groups (Pilcher, 2011; Wærdahl, 2003), which has been described as the *symbolic paradox of consumption* (Simmel, trans. 1964; Tufte, 2007). Additionally, the children become able to systematically place value on material possessions in order to achieve social status among peers as they gain an increased awareness of other peoples' perspectives (Roedder John, 1999). Consequently, materialistic thinking and social motivation for consumption tend to increase (Chaplin and John, 2007).

Bachmann et al. (1993) shows that as children progress from early childhood to adolescence, the peer group influence only becomes stronger in relation to certain kinds of products, those that are exclusive or, in other words, conspicuous. However, several studies demonstrate that different kinds of products may be important in peer relationships, such as toys (Chan, 2004; Wohlwend, 2009), clothes (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Kalmus and Keller, 2009), mobile phones and computers (Buckingham, 2000; Martensen, 2007; Suess et al., 1998). Additionally, the norms around consumption are often gendered (Tufte, 2007; Wærdahl, 2003), where girls focus more on consumption as a way to create and maintain relationships, compared to boys (Chin, 2004; Lundby, 2012).

In conclusion, the review of the available literature indicates that consumption is a significant element in peer relationships among children, and that different possessions may be used as a means to express kindness, identity and belonging. But how then, may we expect that children themselves, at the age of 9 and the age of 12, perceive the link between economic resources and friendship? According to the consumer stages by Roedder John (1999), we may believe that younger children might hold a less diverse understanding of money and consumption, compared to older children. By listening to children's own voices, this exploratory study aims to investigate if and how children actually perceive economic resources as a mean to attract friends, in different stages in life.

Methodology

In total, the data corpus is based on 101 drawings by Swedish tweens: 49 drawings made by 21 boys and 28 girls aged nine, from three school classes in a medium-sized Swedish town in 2010. And 52 drawings made by 19 boys and 33 girls aged twelve, from two school classes in a medium-sized Swedish town in 2009. Information about the pupil's socio-economic status was not gathered; however, the location and prestige of the schools confirm that the selected children were mixed in terms of class and ethnicity. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Parental consent was obtained for each child that participated.

The implementation of the research process varied to some degree between the age groups.

- The nine year old children were divided into nine focus groups, consisting of 4-6 children in each group. The meetings were conducted in a separate room close to the classrooms, during school time and were audio-recorded.
- The twelve year old children were divided into two larger groups, consisting of around 26 children in each group. The meetings were conducted in the classroom, during school time.

All procedures lasted between 20-45 minutes and were introduced with an explanation of the research process and purpose. Thereafter, the author asked for the children's assent and explained that the drawing was voluntary.

Visual methods have been used in child development research for many decades as it allows children to freely express how they conceive their reality, and to take their time to think more reflectively about answers (Freeman and Mathison, 2009; Young and Barrett, 2000). Moreover, drawings provide children with a research activity which is familiar and non-threatening (MacDonald, 2009; Masoumeh Farokhi and Hashemi, 2011). In this study, each child was supplied with drawing material, and then a short vignette about two illustrated children who had recently moved to the city and wanted to make new friends, was presented. To stimulate the children's drawing, the researcher gave the illustrated children a present: a picture of Swedish money (cf. Grønhøj and Bech-Larsen, 2010; Heisley and Levy, 1991). The interesting question was if and how the animated children could attract friends by means of economic resources. To decrease the

risk of the question influencing the answers, the possibility that economic resources could be useless in attracting friends was also mentioned. The children were then asked to draw and/or write what came into their minds from this question.

The methodology provided the children with greater control over the research process (c.f. Barker and Weller, 2003; Barter and Renold, 2000; Christensen, 2004). The children could choose if, how, and what they wanted to draw. However, the social context of drawing is important and the way children draw may be influenced by peers. Drawings can be copied and thus may not illustrate each individual's idea but rather socially constructed beliefs (Einarsdottir, 2007; Fargas-Malet et al, 2012). This was especially visible among the younger children. In the main, the nine year old children experienced the task as difficult and tended to imitate each other.

Understanding the material

The drawings were analyzed through an empirical phenomenological analysis (IPA) which is a constructive tool for research focusing on how participants perceive their personal and social world (Smith, 1998; Smith and Eatough, 2006). At first, the drawings and texts were read a number of times in order to become familiar with the empirical data. The recordings were also transcribed into text. A coding matrix was then created that catalogued the content of the drawings which made it easier to organize them around emerging themes (cf. Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Interpretations were made both from the content of the drawing itself, from the recordings, and from the children's written reflections. The recordings and the written commentaries provided an improved understanding and helped in stabilizing the meaning of the images (cf. Coates and Coates, 2006; Cox, 2005; Ehrlén, 2009). Although the study was based only on 101 drawings, the results provide insights into how children perceive the association between economic resources and peer relationships.

Result

As outlined, this paper explores the perceived association between economic resources and peer relationships among Swedish tweens. The results from drawings made by children aged 9 are presented below, followed by results from drawings made by children aged 12. A comparison between the two age groups is provided in the discussion.

Children aged 9

In total, 49 drawings were collected from children aged 9. In general, the girls were keener to draw and to give answers as to how to use the money, compared to the boys. Several children experienced the question posed as difficult. Of the 49 drawings, 31 answered the research question. 5 of these expressed the view that money was *not* necessary in order to attract friends.

Fig. 1. Drawing by child aged 9. Text: You don't need money to gain friends, you can be kind and nice and get friends!

Some children meant that it felt wrong to “buy friends” and that the most important thing should be “true” kindness. Alicia said, “It doesn’t feel good, you know, to buy things and they think that you’re kind. Then, you know, if you hadn’t bought them, then you don’t know what would have happened”. Thus, some children were concerned about the shallowness that they thought would be embedded in peer relations when consumption was used to attract friends.

However, in most drawings, several ways to use money in order to attract friends was mentioned. The children illustrated presents, footballs, money, jewellery, mobile phones, candy, computer games and clothes. Many drawings illustrated the importance of expressing kindness in order to gain friends. Giving away money or items, such as

presents, jewellery, and candy, was seen to symbolise that the giver was a kind person, someone that peers would like to become friends with. Additionally, the receiver would become happy and thereby, in the mood for play. Presents were the most recurring items in the drawings made by girls. As in the drawing below, made by Felicia, the presents were drawn as wrapped packages.

Fig. 2. Drawing by child aged 9. Text: Girl. Boy.

The main focus was on the ability to be able to give a present, what was inside was seen as, more or less, unimportant. However, some girls also mentioned that specific jewels could be bought for peers, so called “best friend necklaces”, a heart that can be separated into two pieces, and shared with a friend. The girls meant that a child could bring such a necklace to school and ask another girl if she wanted to become friends and wear one part of the necklace. Thus, the necklace was both seen as a gift that could be used to show kindness, and as a symbol that signified connection between friends. Moreover, during the procedure, a few boys painted money on their drawings and explained that money could be given to peers and thereby, make them happy. Likewise, candy and toys were also mentioned as items that could be used as presents.

Footballs, mp3 players, mobile phones, computer games and clothes were also found in a few drawings. However, the children could not explain in what way these items could function in order to attract friends. Some girls divided their drawing into a "girl-side" and a "boy-side".

Fig. 3. Drawing by child aged 9. Text: Girl. Boy.

A necklace was only perceived as a "girl-thing", while a football was only perceived as a "boy-thing". However, a mobile phone and an mp3 player were seen as useful for both boys and girls.

In summary, many of the 49 collected drawings by children aged 9, included suggestions on how to use money in order to attract friends. The most useful way, according to the children, was to buy items, such as presents or jewellery, for peers and thereby, express kindness and make peers happy. Thus, money was mainly seen as a means to be able to offer gifts to peers. Additionally, the girls were keener to draw and to give answers about how to use the money, compared to the boys.

Children aged 12

In total, 52 drawings were collected from children aged 12. All the collected drawings had some connection to the question. In 6 drawings, the children stated that money was unimportant in peer relationships. In some drawings, the children expressed contradictory opinions as to whether money could be used in order to gain friends or not.

Fig. 4. Drawing by child aged 12. Text: You can't buy friendship, but it is smart if you try to melt in so you don't get bullied or excluded, and that may cost!! And you need love...

These kinds of contradictory statements often expressed the thought that money was useless in gaining "true friendship", but at the same time that money was important in order to be part of a group, or to express individuality.

In most drawings, several ways to use money in order to attract friends was mentioned. Expressing kindness, by purchasing candy to peers, was seen as one important aspect in order to gain friends. Most children had simply drawn a bag of candy, chocolate or ice cream and written "candy" beside it. However, a few children had drawn detailed scenarios.

Fig. 6. Drawing by child aged 12. Text: Café – Cakes cost 20 kronor. – Oh no, I can't afford it. – I'll pay (the new pupil).

As can be seen, one boy illustrated a café, with three children standing at the counter. He, in line with a few other children, interpreted money as a mean to provide for other children who couldn't afford to pay.

Furthermore, clothes were the most frequently recurring items in the drawings, especially among girls. The symbolic aspects of clothes were often written, such as brands, fashion, expensive and new clothes, being able to look pretty, and having a specific style.

Fig. 5. Drawing by child aged 12. Text: Dare to have your own style of clothing, because then many people will think that you are interesting..

Additionally, a few children wrote that clothes may change the first impression of a child and that clothes can be used to enable similarity among peers. Thus, both the importance of expressing identity and community in the group was emphasised in these drawings.

Mobile phones were also found in some of the children's drawings. Most children emphasised the instrumental function, the possibility to keep in contact with peers. For example, type in peer's numbers and call other children were suggested as possible ways to attract friends.

Fig. 7. Drawing by child aged 12. Text: A mobile phone so that classmates can write in their telephone numbers

Using money in order to interact with peers was also suggested by a few children, mainly girls. By organizing a party for the money and inviting everyone in the class, children could talk to their classmates and get to know them. Additionally, two girls wrote that money could be given to the teacher and that he or she could arrange a trip for the whole class. Thus, for some girls, being able to socialize together with peers was seen as a way to attract new friends.

Computer games, footballs and computers were also found in some drawings,

mainly made by boys. In a few drawings, elements of social interaction could be found. For example, Filip had written “Facebook” next to a computer. But the lack of written statements on the rest of the drawings makes interpretation uncertain.

In summary, all the children aged 12 expressed some answer connected to the research question. Their interpretations were often detailed and described different scenarios. Most of the 52 drawings included suggestions on how to use money in order to attract friends. In line with the younger children’s perception, the children aged 12 also meant that giving candy could express kindness. However, the most important way to attract friends was to use clothes in order to express identity/community. Moreover, mobile phones could be used in an instrumental sense, and arranging social gatherings could help in gaining friends through interaction.

Concluding discussion

Consumption is a significant element in peer relationships among children. However, depending on age, it is possible that children may have different perceptions on the link between economic resources and peer relationships. Because there has been a lack of research in this area, this study investigates to what extent Swedish tweens perceive economic resources as a means to attract friends. Based on 101 drawings made by children, at the age of 9 and the age of 12, the result indicates that the children, to a great extent, perceived economic resources as a mean to attract friends. This may be interpreted as a materialistic way of thinking, where consumer goods are seen as useful tools in peer relationships. Only a few children expressed the view that money was *not* necessary in order to attract friends. These children often differentiated “true friendship” from other relations in the peer group, meaning that money may gain popularity, but not “real” friends.

Several drawings by children in both age groups were focused on gift-giving, and thereby, *expressing kindness*. Thus, the result strongly supports the conclusions by Chin (2004) and Lundby (2012), that children often view money as a means to maintain relationships through gift-giving. However, three more ways to use consumption were mentioned by children aged 12, *express identity/community*, *instrumental use* and *create*

arenas for interaction. The need to *express identity and community* was apparent in many drawings by the older children, especially the ones concerning clothes (cf. Pilcher, 2011; Tufte, 2007). *Instrumental use* was connected to mobile phones and computers. These items were found in drawings by both age groups, but it was only children aged 12 that could explain how the technology could be used in order to attract friends. Moreover, the older children also suggested that money could be used in order to create social arenas for *interaction*, where friendship could be manifested. Earlier research has mainly focused on specific items, however, these results show the importance of also investigating consumption of social activities in peer relationships among children.

According to Bachmann et al. (1993), the peer group only becomes stronger to certain kinds of products as children grow older. However, in this study, the items that were seen to increase the possibility of gaining friends were common objects, and not items that would be interpreted as conspicuous. Children from both age groups mentioned that money could be used for buying candy, mobile phones and computers (c.f. Martensen, 2007; Suess et al., 1998), footballs, and clothes (c.f. Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Wærdahl, 2003). The youngest children also suggested presents and jewels. Earlier research has shown that toys may be an important aspect in children's peer relationships (Chan, 2004; Wohlwend, 2009). However, none of the children in this study mentioned toys.

In conclusion, this study strongly supports the suggested stages by Roedder John (1999). Children aged 9 seemed to possess less symbolic thinking, compared to children aged 12. Additionally, the younger children were rather concrete in their answers, and they often experienced difficulty in explaining how money could be used in order to gain friends. They did mention certain social motives for consumption, such as making peers happy, but this was very limited. The older children, especially the girls, seemed to have more consumer knowledge and greater skills concerning how to use consumer goods in peer relationships. Consequently, the older children seemed to place more value on material possessions in order to achieve social status, and show stronger materialistic beliefs, than the younger children (cf. Chaplin and John, 2007; Roedder John, 1999). However, the result generates questions about the consumer development processes among boys and girls, as the girls in both age groups seemed to have a more developed

and symbolic reasoning. Certain consumption, such as footballs and jewellery were also seen as gendered (cf. Tufte, 2007; Wærdahl, 2003). The girls were, in line with Chin (2004), also more focused on gift-giving, compared to boys.

Because of the small sample size, it is difficult to generalize results obtained in the current study to a population of children in general. Moreover, when interpreting the results it is important to consider the specific methodology used. The result should not be interpreted as a concrete reality for the children that took part in this study. However, the patterns that may be recognized in many of the drawings provide us with an understanding of how children may perceive consumption in relation to friendship. Further research should address some of the limitations with this study. For example, observations could gain insights into how children actually use consumption in peer relationships at different ages. Moreover, the research design could be replicated with older children. Doing so, it would be meaningful to have individual interviews with each child about the drawing, in order to improve the analysis.

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