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'If you have money, you can be more kind to them'. Possessions and Economic Resources in Children's Peer Groups.

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships among third grade children.

Methodology

In total, 48 Swedish children aged 9, were interviewed in focus groups, using a projective vignette technique and pictures. The children were asked if and how children in general could gain new friends through material possessions and money.

Findings

The findings indicate that children perceive possessions as multi-functional tools in peer relationships. The ability to fit into the peer group, by the use of different possessions, was perceived as especially important. Additionally, children perceived money as an altruistic tool to demonstrate kindness.

Research limitations

This is a qualitative study and the results are based solely on 10 focus groups. In addition, a limited set of items, which regulated the interviews, was presented to the children in order to stimulate more profound dialogues in the groups.

Practical implications

This study implies that children's ability to fit into the peer group seem to be more important than the need to express individuality. Thus, it may be a challenge for social marketers, teachers, parents, and others to address children's consumption behavior as a factor strongly influenced by the peer group.

Originality/value

Previous research indicates that material possessions are important for children in order to gain popularity among peers. However, few studies have tried to investigate how children perceive the functions of material possessions and economic resources.

Keywords

Children, consumption, economic resources, tweens.

Paper type

Research paper

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Introduction

Pippi braided her hair into two tight braids that stuck straight out. She considered. "How would it be if we went into town and did some shopping?" she said at last. "But we haven't any money", said Tommy. "I have", said Pippi, and to prove it she opened her suitcase, which of course was chock full of gold pieces (Lindgren, 1997:14).

Pippi Longstocking, Sweden's famous children's book character was the strongest and richest nine-year old girl in the world. She used her money to purchase presents and sweets to peers. By expressing such kindness and generosity, Pippi attracted new friends and she soon became popular. For children aged nine, also called *tweens*, peers are crucial for the development of a positive self-image (Tufté, 2007). The concept of tweens refers to a transition, mainly between 7-12 years old. A tense stage between childhood and youth, where power struggles and identity crises are common and where children begin to understand the value of possessions based on social meaning and significance (Kalmus & Keller, 2009; Roedder John, 1999). Children develop from being highly dependent on parents, to becoming more influenced by friends (Kratzer et al., 2009; Molenmaker et al., 2008). Friendship is a fundamental part of children's life, but it is manifested in a rich variety of ways depending on cultural systems (Bukowski, Newcomb & Hartup, 1996; Krappmann, 1996). As in the story of Pippi, consumption and economic resources are important to attract friends and to avoid bullying (Chan, 2004; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Lundby, 2011; Lundby, 2010; Ridge, 2011; Olsson, 2011; Weinger, 2000). Children often achieve popularity and a sense of community in the peer group by the use of 'appropriate' possessions (Downie & Glazebrook, 2007; Pugh, 2009; Roper & La Niece, 2009; Wærdahl, 2003). At the same time, these possessions may position the child as a unique individual in

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the group (Kalmus & Keller, 2009). This has been described as the symbolic paradox of consumption (Simmel, trans. 1964; Tufte, 2007). However, how children actually use possessions and economic resources to attract friends have not been extensively studied (Pugh, 2009). This paper attempts to explore the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships among children. Two questions are posed. How do children perceive the functions of *possessions* in order to attract friends? And how do children perceive the functions of *economic resources* in order to attract friends? In Sweden, economic inequality between households is increasing (Salonen, 2011). Thus, while everyday life for children is strongly influenced by consumption, the economical preconditions for children vary. In order for future research to understand the social consequences of not being able to consume to the same extent as peers, knowledge about how material possessions and economic resources function in peer relationships is vital.

Consumption among peers

Like Pippi Longstocking, children become consumers at an early age. A number of researchers have sought to examine the role of consumption and economic resources in peer relationships (for example, Allison, 2006; Belk, Mayer & Driscoll, 1984; Buckingham, 2000; Brusdal, 2001; Cook, 2005; Cook, 2008; Damay, 2008; Kline, 1993; Kochuyt, 2004; Schor, 2004; Seiter, 1993). According to earlier research, toys, media and clothes seems to be important possessions in order to attract friends. Chan (2004) examined Chinese children's (6-12 years old) perceptions of toys. Even at very young ages, children were able to express the value of toys based on the ability to attract friends. Younger children mainly related material possessions with happiness and friendship.

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A study by Suess et al. (1998) on media use among Finnish, Spanish, and Swiss children (6-16 years old), confirmed that media could strengthen peer relationships. Children frequently used media with peers and new themes of conversation occurred in the peer group through the use of media. Likewise, Oelsen (2003) argues that private communication spaces with peers are established through mobile phones. Mobile phones may also be used to achieve popularity in the peer group (Martensen, 2007). In Downies and Glaze Brooks' (2007) study of Australian tweens (6-13 years old) and their mobile use, the majority of children that possessed a mobile phone were motivated by status and aesthetics in their purchase decisions.

Specific clothes may provide children with feelings of community and sometimes membership of a specific group (Tufte, 2004; Wærdahl, 2003). In a study by Elliott and Leonard (2004), brand name training shoes influenced children's (8-12 years old) view of the owner's abilities to fit into the group. A child wearing brand name training shoes was seen as popular and interesting. The importance of appearance in order to be popular is also emphasized in a study by Kalmus and Keller (2009). They collected essays written by 12-year-old schoolchildren in Estonia which illustrated that appearance was important in order to be "cool". The main factor for looking "cool" was paying attention to details and having the newest and the hottest outfit. In addition, gender was often expressed through competent use of gender-specific details and attire.

In conclusion, the review of the literature indicates that toys, media and clothes are significant aspects in peer relationships among children. However, there is a lack of studies that examines how children perceive *the functions of these aspects* in order to attract friends.

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Furthermore, there is a lack of studies that examine how children perceive *the functions of economic resources* in order to attract friends. This exploratory study aims to fill this gap and to provide a nuanced picture of children's perceptions of possessions and economic resources among peers.

Conceptual framework

To understand the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships we may interpret children's activity as symbolic interaction (Mead, 1976).

When children develop as individuals, they collectively and creatively use, and infuse possessions with symbolic meaning in their peer cultures (Corsaro, 2005). Besides the symbolic functions, material possessions may also be used to fulfill instrumental functions (Dittmar, 2008). Dittmar illustrates the two sides of consumption in a model of the main psychological functions of material possessions.

Figure 1. *Functions of material possessions* (Dittmar, 2008:40)

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The *instrumental function* of material possessions is connected to use-related consumption and emotional consumption. Toys, such as Barbie dolls, for example, enable play between children and may even give rise to emotional experiences such as happiness, and signify that experience.

The *symbolic-expressive function* is connected to emotional consumption and identity-related consumption. According to Dittmar (2008), people use material goods to make them feel better, but the mood improvement is usually tied not only to use-related features of these goods but also to their capacity for symbolizing positive aspects of identity. The identity-related function of possession is subdivided into three types. First, *categorical consumption* refers to the use of possessions that symbolize group membership, social status and social position among peers. Second, *inter-personal consumption* refers to the use of possessions that signifies special relationships with specific individuals, such as friends. And third, *self-expressive consumption* refers to the use of possessions that express unique qualities, values and attitudes. In this perspective, possessions embody a system of meanings which, through consumption, can be used by children as an expression of their individuality, and as a way of signifying inter-personal relationships and group membership. Thus, the ability to consume may be regarded as a crucial part of children's social inter-action skills, that is, the ability to be part of a group and embody their perspective while simultaneously expressing individuality (Sommer, 2002). However, the distinctions between the functions are not, of course, absolute. One single possession can represent several psychological functions. For example, a mobile phone can function as a communication tool, as well as symbolize social status.

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Even though the model focuses on possessions, it may also be used to analyze the functions of economic resources. Economic resources may, of course, be used instrumentally in order to purchase products. However, spending money may also be symbolic, and for example express wealth and status. In this article, Dittmar's model is used as a stepping stone to depict how children perceive the functions of possessions and economic resources in order to attract friends. The model reappears in the conclusion for reporting the empirical data.

Methodology

This study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board at the University of Linköping, Sweden, and conducted in accordance with ethical standards. The data corpus is based on interviews with 21 boys and 27 girls aged nine, in three schools in a medium-sized Swedish town in 2010. Information about the pupil's socio-economic status was not gathered; however, the location and prestige of the schools confirm that the selected children are mixed according to class and ethnicity. Parental consent was obtained for each child that participated. In addition, the children received information about the study, through letters and through their teachers, one week before the interviews.

The children were divided into 10 focus groups, four with boys and six with girls, and were interviewed using a projective vignette technique, and pictures. Focus group discussions enabled the researcher to produce concentrated data on a precise topic and provided rich and in-depth data. The dynamics of children's peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups although this is not a natural situation. As conversations in focus groups were combined with a vignette and pictures, children's perception and interpretation on how possessions and economic resources may increase the ability to attract

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friends became more accessible, and produced deeper insights into behaviours and social interaction (cf. Grønhøj & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Heisley & Levy, 1991).

Procedure

The interviews were conducted in a separate room nearby the classrooms, during school time, and were audio-recorded. The interviews lasted from 20 to 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 interview was voluntary and that the children could return to their classroom at any time. A short vignette about two illustrated children, (see Figure 2) who had recently moved to the city and wanted to make new friends, was presented. To avoid ethnic associations the illustrated children were green.

Figure 2. *The illustrated children*

To stimulate deeper conversations of how children perceive the functions of possessions and economic resources in order to attract friends, images of four themes were presented: toys (cf. Chan, 2004), clothes (cf. Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Kalmus & Keller, 2009; Tufte, 2004; Waerdahl, 2003), media (cf. Downies & Galzebrook, 2007; Oelsen, 2003; Suess et al., 1998), and economic resources. In addition, a fifth theme, activities, was also presented. However, in this article, focus is on the four themes that symbolize possessions and economic resources. Two items were selected to represent each theme.

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Table 1.

Themes and pictures.

Themes	Picture 1	Picture 2
Toys	Barbie	Lego
Clothes	Dress	Sweater
Media	Mobile phone	Computer
Economic resources	Money	Money

The number of items was limited in order to stimulate more profound dialogues in the groups (cf. Heisley & Levy, 1991). Photographs of a Barbie doll and a Lego robot represented toys. These toys are familiar to most children in Sweden. Photographs of an ordinary sweater and a dress represented clothes. The third theme, media, was represented by photographs of a computer and a mobile phone. Both computers and mobile phones are common possessions among nine year old children in Sweden. Brands were not visible in any of the pictures. Economic resources were represented by photographs of Swedish money. The interesting question was if and how the animated children could attract friends by means of the items shown. To decrease the risk of the question influencing the answers, the possibility that none of the items could help attract friends was also emphasized.

As the children selected items the following standard questions was posed by the author. (1) Why did you select this item? (2) What would happen if the children brought this item to school? (3) How may the children use this item to attract friends? The children discussed their answers together and negotiated the functions of possessions. The items and the

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vignette framed the conversations, made them flexible yet structured, and provided an informal atmosphere and possibilities to develop and explain choices and thoughts (cf. Cele 2006; Elliott & Leonard 2004; Grønhøj & Bech-Larsen, 2010; Pickering, 2010). Attention was placed on the illustrated children, allowing the group to be more open and expressive. Furthermore, the projective technique increased children's control of inter-action during the interviews (cf. Barter & Renold, 2000; Christensen, 2004).

Understanding the material

The material was 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 & Eatough, 2006). At first, verbatim transcriptions of the audio taped interviews were read a number of times to become familiar with the empirical data. The left-hand margin was used to annotate interesting aspects that were mentioned. Similarities, differences and contradictions in the material came to light in this process. Next, the right-hand margin was used to note emerging themes. These themes were as follows, *enable play, enable communication, enable similarity, and enable kindness*. Afterwards the themes were listed and the connections between them were analyzed.

The data consists of the children's negotiated interpretations of the presented event.

Although the study was based only on 10 focus groups, the results provide insights of how children perceive the functions of possessions and economic resources in peer relationships. In addition, by contributing to the research on children's consumption, earlier research becomes both strengthened and questioned. Children's attitudes and perceptions have been quoted to illustrate the result. The quotations have been translated from Swedish to English.

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Results

As previously outlined, this paper attempts to explore the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships among children, applying focus group interviews. The results indicate that children, aged 9, were able to reason about the functions of possessions based on social meaning and significance (cf. Kalmus & Keller, 2009; Roedder John, 1999). It was found that a few children thought that none of the items were needed to attract friends.

Petra: Some people think that you have to have things when you come to a new school in order to make new friends, but you don't really have to. Just because you are cool, have nice clothes, the latest clothes, the newest bike, the latest mobile phone and things like that, it doesn't really make any difference – that person just has to be considerate and good natured.

However, most of the children imagined several ways to use the presented items to attract friends. Four specific functions were dominant, *enable play*, *enable communication*, *enable similarity*, and *enable kindness*. The results are presented in these themes.

Enable play

The ability to enable play was mainly seen as an important function in order to attract friends. Playing electronic games with other children, through the computer or the mobile phone, was emphasized as a way to create friendship. Additionally, toys were associated with play and, thereby, feelings of enjoyment and pleasure. Playing with toys could simplify interaction with new friends, and make other children curious and attract them to participate.

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Maria: You could give her a Barbie doll.

Kaci: Yes. Someone else might also have a Barbie with them.

Interviewer: So, if we say that she came to school on her first day, and was out here with her Barbie doll, what would she do with it?

Maria: Play with it.

Kaci: Play with it so that perhaps, someone else would like to join in.

However, it was also seen as important to have the "correct" toy depending on the child's gender. Most children said that a boy would be bullied if he brought a Barbie to school. Consequently, the pressure to fit into the group seemed to be strong, especially for boys.

Enable communication

Besides play, most children felt that computers and cell phones could enable communication. Establishing contact with children through msn, chat, Facebook, blogs, and homepages was seen as ways to attract new friends.

Frida: You perhaps find someone in your class, you can start to chat with each other write to each other by e-mail and then you perhaps become better friends doing this at school and then perhaps you want to play with them during break and so on.

Liv: And if you play, then you can go to each other's homes and use the computer.

Many children discussed communication in terms of a circle argument. Through Internet, contact with new friends could be established. Thereafter, the relationship could develop

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through interaction in school. After that, the child and the new friend could go home to each other and use the Internet, either to play games or to socialize together with other children on the web.

Enable similarity

The importance of likeness was frequently emphasized by most participants. If children possessed similar toys or had similar music on their mobile phones, they would be able to introduce a conversation with each other and, thereby, become friends. For girls, this was especially dominant with clothes. Most participants felt that girls ought to look attractive by wearing "girl-clothes", such as skirts, tights, and dresses.

Olivia: She should definitely not have a shirt and jacket

Ilona: But girls can actually wear them.

Olivia: But not one of those long jackets like they have when they play the piano.

Ilona: No, a special girl's jacket.

Emma: A girl's thing.

The girls agreed that a jacket may be worn by girls, but that it must be a girl jacket, a "girl thing". Thus, clothes could function as effective symbols of likeness. In addition, to avoid jealousy among peers a girl should fit into the group and not look "too pretty". Brands were not perceived as important.

Enable kindness

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During conversations, many children expressed that the most important thing in order to attract friends was to be kind. Kindness could, however, be expressed through the use of possessions. Giving away, or lending out, toys, computers and mobile phones, was considered to be a symbol of kindness. This was particularly so in discussions about the pictures of money.

Emma: You can buy them something that perhaps makes them really happy to get a present and so they play together and become best friends and never ever argue.

Kaci: And then you can take it to school and if anyone sees them, then they can give it to them – here you can have my money. Then they can buy something for them because they were so kind and generous and then they can be friends.

In every group, money was perceived to function as a tool to express kindness. A boy summarized most children's perceptions of money; 'If you have money, you can be more kind to them'. Interestingly, none of the interviewed children suggested that the illustrated children in the vignette should use the money to buy something for themselves.

Concluding discussion

As outlined previously, this study aimed to explore the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships among children. The findings indicate that children may view possessions as multi-functional tools in peer relationships. Only a few children thought that none of the items were needed to attract friends. The analysis suggest that the participants mainly perceived four specific functions with possessions, *enable play*, *enable communication*, *enable similarity*, and *enable kindness*. Economic resources, however, were

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only perceived as having one function, *enable kindness*. Below, the results are presented in Dittmar's figure from 2008.

Figure 3. *The functions of children's possessions.*

Most children appeared to perceive that toys and media could be instrumental in attracting friends. Firstly, toys were felt to enable play. Playing with toys was, in line with Chan (2004), also seen as emotional in the sense that it was perceived as fun. In accordance with Wohlwend (2009), toys also seemed to structure interaction between children. Secondly, media could enable communication. In line with results from Oelsen (2003), communication was seen as the main function of the computer. As Suess et al. (1998) also showed, the computers could be very sociable and even strengthen peer relationships. This was also the

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case with mobile phones. However, in contrast to Downies and Glazebrook's (2007) study, the children did not view mobile phone brands as important.

The identity-related function of possessions is subdivided into three types. First, clothes and toys were perceived to have *categorical functions*. By wearing the same clothes, or playing with the same toys, children could show that they were part of the "girl-group" or "boy-group". In line with earlier research, clothes were associated to popularity and acceptance in the group (i.e. Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Keller & Kalmus, 2009; Waerdahl, 2003). However, in contrast to results from Elliott and Leonard (2009), brand names were not mentioned as important. Secondly, clothes and toys, as well as media, were also perceived to have *inter-personal functions*. Having the same outfit, the same doll, or listening to the same music as the new friend could confirm friendship. To a great extent, the children felt that friends are similar to each other. And third, toys and media were also perceived to have *self-expressive functions* if they were used as presents and, thereby, expressing kindness. The analysis of discussions reveals that children perceived money as an altruistic tool to demonstrate kindness. As in the story of Pippi Longstocking, giving presents was seen as a way of being kind and to gain friends. Interestingly, money was not perceived to attract friends in any other way.

In summary, the findings indicate that material possessions and economic resources seem to be important in order for children to attract friends. However, the participants were not concerned about having the most expensive mobile phone or trendy clothes. Their perceptions were rather that the main functions of the possessions were to fit into the group. Interestingly, none of the children emphasized the importance of being unique. Thus, this study, as earlier research (Downie & Glazebrook, 2007; Pugh, 2009; Roper & La Niece,

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2009; Wærdahl, 2003), illustrates that children seem to achieve popularity and a sense of community within the peer group by the use of 'appropriate' possessions, i.e., the possessions that are accepted among peers. In other words, the ability to fit into the group seems to be especially important in younger children's social interaction skills.

As the economic preconditions for Swedish children vary, so may the possibilities to fit into the group and to express kindness. Further research may explore the social consequences by addressing some of the limitations of this study. By triangulation one may explore how the result from a projective method coincides with children's actual behavior. Through observations, combined with focus groups and individual interviews, a more complete picture of the function of material possessions could be provided.

Implications

In the Scandinavian countries, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, tweens have become more autonomous and reflective consumers, with their own economic resources (Lundby, 2011; Lundby, 2010). However, this study implies that the ability to fit into the group seems to be more important than the need to express individuality. Thus, it may be a challenge for social marketers, teachers, parents, and others, to address children's consumption behavior as a factor strongly influenced by the peer group. Moreover, possessions and economic resources seem to function as tools to attract friends. Thus, the aspect of managing the social consequences of economic inequality in children's peer groups needs to be further addressed.

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