



“Summary of article by Stephen Kline: Playing with Culture: Toys, TV, and Children’s Culture in the Age of Marketing” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 104-107

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The problems that have been identified in children's marketing are the same as in all marketplaces – it is not a question of "harm done" but, rather, of our failure to find ways to make the marketplace a positive cultural force in contemporary society. For this reason the debates about the limits on children's advertising, the banality and violence in children's programming, and the maintenance of creativity in children's play can all be reduced to the same root issue. The marketplace will never inspire children with high ideals or positive images of the personality, provide stories which help them adjust to life's tribulations or promote play activities that are most helpful to their maturation. (350)

A child's play behavior constitutes an essential part of his or her cognitive development, emotional maturation, and socialization. Since the deregulation of television, the imaginative play of children has been structured increasingly by animated television programming and marketing strategies that target children's emotional investment in toys. This paper argues that the developmental benefit of some toys is compromised by marketing activities that inhibit creativity in play behavior and calls into question the large role that the market plays in the production of children's culture..

Although the effects of television content on children are equivocal, the fact that children spend 80 percent of their spare time fantasizing – while watching television and/or playing with toys – suggests that television has an important influence on children's culture and behavior. The main television fare offered to children is animated fantasy programming that introduces gendered, stereotyped characters who eventually make their way onto toy store shelves and into the homes of young viewers. These shows deliver stories about the background and adventures of characters and specify what is appropriate behavior for each, providing a fictional universe from which children construct their imaginative play.

CHARACTER-TOYS, MARKETING AND PLAY

Capitalizing on the strong connection between children's emotional investment in character-toys and sales, marketers make use of animated programming and construct lovable, attractive and heroic characters that facilitate identification and modeling behavior. Effective marketing of character-toys coincides with their successful placement in children's play and conversation.

In light of Piaget's observation that all learning combines creativity and imitation, it is particularly worrisome that play involving character-toys exaggerates the imitative component of play behavior. Animated television programs as well as advertisements tell children what character-toys can do, how they should look, and how to play with them. Children's mimicry of a narrative voice, the brief, aimless, episodic nature of their pretend stories, and the limited resourcefulness in the use of their play areas reflect impoverished creativity. Children rarely mix characters from different fictional discourses, and seldom break or transform rules or alter the perceived narrative context associated with a given toy. "The rehearsal and practice of tactical thinking is the only evidence we saw of complex cognitions being employed in children's character-toy play." (340) For example, in one study, boys employed a great deal of tactical knowledge when playing with toy soldiers, e.g., surprise attacks, sabotage, and attacking from the blind side.

Unlike earlier generations in which street play incorporated group-oriented games, modern play is represented by many children as a solitary activity, removed from the experience of parents and involvement with peers. When children are engaged in peer play, most contemporary interactions involve the articulation of rules and the following of rules that are known to accompany toys.

The ultimate threat presented by character-toy play behavior is that play becomes more a source of entertainment and less a source of emotional growth. Many psychologists believe that pretend play advances emotional development by allowing children to gain control over emotional conflicts. But, fantasy play with character-toys does not lead toward mastery of emotional conflict, especially in the case of heavy viewers of television violence. One group of researchers indicates that emotional mastery is absent from the fantasy play of viewers who are over-exposed to the limited range of emotions that occur in action-adventure programs. Other research indicates that children often represent play with character-toys as a happy time with limited emotional engagement.

PLAY, SOCIALIZATION AND CONSUMERISM

Gendered character-toys and television programming feed into play behavior that exaggerates differences between boys and girls.

Targeting in the toy market....gendered the themes of children's television programming and it created a markedly sex-typed image of peer play in the commercials. Television before deregulation strove for large audiences so producers designed programs for a homogeneous children's audience. Whereas the cartoon characters of the 1950s were either asexual or balanced in their gender appeal, the action-figure animations specifically use characterization and storyline to accommodate known gender preferences and play values. (341)

Children prefer to play with others who are familiar with and share an interest in their favorite toys. Since most character-toys are gendered, play with these toys is also gendered. As a result, boys and girls develop different sets of cognitive, emotional, and social skills through their use of toys.

Gendered toys and television programming feed into play behavior that exaggerates differences between boys and girls. To the extent that play is based on television characters and action figures, children prefer to play with others who are familiar with and share an interest in their favorite toys. Since most character toys are gendered, boys and girls find it increasingly difficult to play together with certain kinds of toy.

Television and toy marketing socialize children in a much broader way than simply introducing gender stereotypes. The same forces also help develop consumerist attitudes and consumer skills in children by linking the ability to recognize and understand advertising with toy requests and purchases. Commercials tell children of the need for money and the availability of purchasable toys. Parents facilitate the consumer socialization of children by using toys as rewards. Children make judgments about each other based on the type, number and cost of their toys, explicitly recognizing socioeconomic status through play. Children may also associate short- and long-term aspirations with goods: wanting to take Barbie on vacation or desiring the career of a favorite character-toy).

Psychologists have much to say about the importance of play to a child's understanding of personal, social, and economic issues. Bruno Bettelheim contends that the most important functions of play involve problem resolution, social experimentation, and the accommodation of time pressures. Lita Furby theorizes that children learn from play the concept of property rights, regard for possessions, and an ability to manipulate environments, all of which contribute to a sense of personal autonomy. However, in an era of intensified marketing, children also learn consumer skills and consumerist attitudes.

CONCLUSION

To contend that marketing to children is a strictly economic venture is to ignore the powerful impact of the marketplace on the socialization of children. To frame the question of whether the market harms children in any measurable or discernible way directs attention away from the problem of whether we want children's culture to be a reflection of adult consumer culture. Marketers, interested primarily in the bottom line, have been granted such an unprecedented influence over the construction of children's culture that we should reconsider this arrangement, bearing in mind the bottom line for children and our future.

Business interests trying to maximize profits cannot be expected to worry about cultural values or social objectives beyond the consumerist cultural vector that underwrites commercial media. If we value a cultural dimension beyond the domain of the commodity, we must first establish a new framework for the culture industries which recognizes this limitation and ensures that quality and excellence remain criteria for the production of children's culture. (350)