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"'If you have money, you can be more kind to them’ : Possessions and Economic Resources in Children’s Peer Groups"
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Abstract
This study attempts to explore the functions of material possessions and economic resources in peer relationships among children. In total, 48 Swedish children aged 9, were interviewed in focus groups, using a projective vignette technique and pictures. 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.

Keywords
Children, consumption, economic resources, tweens.

Paper type
Extended abstract
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For children aged nine, also called tweens, peers are crucial for the development of a positive self-image (Tufte, 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). At this age, consumption and economic resources are often important to attract friends and to avoid bullying (Lundby, 2010; Ridge, 2011; Olsson, 2011; Weinger, 2000). According to earlier research, toys (Chan, 2004), media (Downies & Glazebrooks, 2007; Martensen, 2007; Oelsen, 2003; Suess et al., 1998) and clothes (Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Tufte, 2004; Wærdahl, 2003) are significant aspects in peer relationships among children. However, how children actually use these possessions, and economic resources, to attract friends have not been extensively studied (Pugh, 2009). This study 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). 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. This study is part of a larger Ph.D. work with focus on the meaning of consumption in children’s peer groups.

Methodology

This study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board at the University of Linkoping, Sweden, and conducted in accordance with ethical standards. The data corpus is based on focus group 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.

The interviews were conducted in a separate room nearby the classrooms, during school time, and were audio-recorded. A short vignette about two illustrated children, who had recently moved to the city and wanted to make new friends, was presented. The interesting question was if and how the illustrated children could attract friends by means of different items and economic resources. To stimulate deeper conversations, images of four themes were presented: toys, clothes, media, and economic resources. In addition, a fifth theme, activities, was also presented. However, in this abstract, focus is on the four themes that symbolize possessions and economic resources. Two items were selected to represent each theme in order to gain more profound dialogues in the groups (cf. Heisley & Levy, 1991). To decrease the risk of the question influencing the answers, the possibility that none of the items could help attract friends was also emphasized.

Main results

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 only perceived as having one function, *enable kindness*.

According to Dittmar (2008), the main psychological functions of material possessions may be divided into the *instrumental function* of material possessions and the *symbolic-expressive function* of consumption. 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 Wohlweld (2009), toys also seemed to structure interaction between children. Secondly, media could enable communication. In line with results from Oelsn (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 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 *symbolic-expressive 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. Buying 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.
References


