Young Children’s Character Culture in Japan: Possession, Knowledge and Belongingness

Mayumi Takahashi
mayumi.takahashi@svt.ntnu.no

Keywords: young children, character culture, consumption, belongingness, Japan

Introduction

Once this one [Anpanman fork case] gets broken, I’m getting Shinkenger one!

Taito (boy, age 4)

Preschool children’s claims about receiving, or being about to receive, character goods are often a conversational gambit in their peer culture. For young children in Japan, like other older children and adults, the consumption of character merchandise is part of their everyday lives (Bandai Character, 2000). Children actively and consistently seek commercial availabilities and trends of particular characters in their situated social groups. The possession, appropriation and representation of media-related or licensed characters – which I term ‘character culture’ – has been a unique socio-cultural phenomenon in Japan (Miyashita, 2001), and in fact, these characters have been acknowledged, among both adults and children, both as identity markers for individuals and as a form of social, cultural, economic and relational currency (Kayama, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to gain an insight into how preschool children aged 3-5 years construct their sense of belonging in their peer culture in Japan through character goods and knowledge. The research is based on five months of ethnographic fieldwork in two preschools in a suburban city. My research interest is children’s way of approaching others and maintaining the relationships through character consumption: it appeared that character consumption played a key role in their production and reproduction of peer culture.

Within the available research, children’s peer culture is typically portrayed as “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro, 2005: 110), often entailing media-related goods and knowledge (Allison, 2006; Ito, 2005; Tobin, 2004b). Existing literature indicates that possessing and knowing about popular commercialised products have an influential role in
peer culture, which inevitably affects children’s sense of belonging (Pugh, 2009) and their interpretation of their wider social world (Dyson, 1997; Änggård, 2005).

This paper expands on the concept of “economy of dignity” – a sense of belonging (Pugh, 2009), by considering how children undertake ‘face-work’ in their deployment of character knowledge and commodities. It looks at how children establish and manage their public self-image in order to allow a sense of connectedness among peers: how they incorporate character consumption into their peer culture; and how their strategic representation of character possession and knowledge may compromise their visibility among peers. I show how, in their efforts to join and feel connected to others, the young children constantly, and often creatively, shape and reshape the meanings and values of those commercialised character goods and knowledge.

**Character Culture**

‘Character culture’ has been historically part of Japanese culture as a whole, encompassing the whole age range from young children to elderly people, and both males and females (Aihara, 2007; Bandai Character, 2000; Kayama, 2001; Yuzawa, 2003). Kayama (2001) reports that 87% of Japanese people show positive attitudes towards characters, and the ownership rate of character goods exceeds 80% (Bandai Character, 2000). Character-related products are found everywhere in Japan – not only in private homes but also in the public sphere, such as on buses and airplanes. Although Japanese people understand that the association of these characters with products and services is a marketing strategy that is used to increase profits, few express strong resistance to character goods. The possession of, and knowledge about, particular characters are used for ease in communication. In addition, their strategic use in communication plays a particularly important role in involvement and sense of belonging in social groups. These commercial characters, with a few exceptions, are more or less positively accepted and viewed in contemporary Japanese society, and they are now spreading globally, as several Western anthropologists have discussed (see Allison, 2006; McVeigh, 2000; Tobin, 2004a).

The term 'character' is generally used as a collective term for human figures, robots, anthropomorphic animals and plants, the heroes or heroines that appear in fairy tales,
picture books, serialised manga in magazines and newspapers, films, animations, television shows and movies (Kyarakutā Māketingu 2002). In this paper, what I mean by ‘character’ is different from the term ‘anime’ which is often used in Western dialogue. Instead, the usage of ‘character’ in this paper is more closely related to media and licensed illustrations, of which the best-known example is probably Hello Kitty. In Japan character culture – the possession of and knowledge about particular characters – plays a particularly important role in communication and creating a sense of belonging in social groups.

The Economy of Dignity: Making themselves Visible

In order to establish a sense of connectedness and belonging among peers, children adopt a variety of strategies. In the preschool classroom, children claim, challenge, monitor and share whatever enables them to participate among their peers. This system of social meaning-making where children make themselves visible and audible – present, and therefore mattering to their peers – is what Allison Pugh calls the “economy of dignity” (Pugh, 2009). In her book, Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture, she defines ‘dignity’ as the quality or state of being worthy, “worthy of belonging”: “[w]ith dignity, children are visible to their peers, and granted the aural space, the very right to speak in their own community’s conversation” (Pugh, 2009: 7). Relying on mostly discursive rules governing their talk, children negotiate values not only to do with their character consumption but also personal facts – from possessions of character goods to whether or not they can eat green pepper, from whether or not they have siblings to knowledge about popular characters. Despite her attention to the social inequality of children’s households, across her field sites, Pugh (2009) found that the conversational negotiations of low-income children and affluent children are very similar in tone and style:

Children talk. They assert, they mumble, they brag, they beg, they encourage, they sympathize, they argue. Through talk, children, like adults, mould and shape the relationships that form their environment. Children use talk to establish, if only momentarily, who is part of their world; their conversations are like a country pond into which they dive … (Pugh, 2009: 50)

The concept of “economy of dignity” enables us to focus more on children’s willingness to belong to their peer world, rather than on a more traditional view of consumers’
competitive status-seeking practices. According to the traditional view, people desire to buy goods that they believe will confer higher and better status, in order to win their esteem and envy of others: this approach is apparent in Veblen’s account of the “conspicuous consumption” of the American “leisure class” (Veblen, 1899) written more than one hundred years ago. Evoking jealousy and envy is certainly part of the emotional encounters that characterise children’s consumer practices, but to a large extent, particularly when discussing young children’s peer culture, Pugh’s notion of ‘dignity’ seems more appropriate. As she puts it, this term “refers less to ‘envy’ than to the ‘esteem’ of others, the goal of joining the circle rather than one of bettering it” (Pugh, 2009: 7 emphasis in original).

As children collectively shape their “economy of dignity” in peer interaction, particular character goods and knowledge are transformed into relational currencies, tokens of value filled with meanings. Within an everyday preschool classroom, children’s economies of dignity are constantly challenged and negotiated in the contextual landscape; and in order to join in the conversation or play and make themselves worthy of belonging among peers, each child works on his/her face, “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61).

The concept of “face” was first introduced into social theory by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1955) with his article On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction. The term “face-work” was coined to describe the actions taken by people to make up for omissions or threats – how people manage their self-image in front of the audience in order to counteract incidents that threaten their faces. Since people are emotionally attached to their faces, they feel great when their faces are well maintained, but conversely, losing face leads to emotional damage and pain: “face” is thus a synonym for dignity and prestige. Goffman’s concept of face was expanded by social anthropologists Brown and Levinson (1987) in their politeness theory that accounts for people’s use of conversational strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts in interpersonal relationships. The concept of face or face-work used by these social scientists focuses primarily on conversation: it suggests that in talk, people are constantly seeking to save face (avoid loss/damage of self-image), and that face-threatening situations carry the risk of losing face. My use of the term differs to some extent here but supports Pugh’s understanding of face-work: “the impression management that involves the presentation of
an honorable self – in order to gather dignity in public” (Pugh, 2009: 52). As her research offers deep insights into children’s experiences, I first of all focus on the people, children doing face-work rather than on their conversation whose norms face-work maintains. In their economies of dignity, children do face-work to save face, to rescue their public self-image that allows a sense of their visibility and belonging. Yet, first and foremost, the face-work establishes their public self-image. In the everyday conversations and free play in the preschool, they seek attention and connectedness – a process that is well expressed in the Japanese idiom “selling face” (Carr, 1992).

Research Context and Methods
Given the growing evidence of the central role that consumer culture plays in many young children’s lives (Cook, 2004; Hori, 1996; Seiter, 1993), it is important to pay more attention to children’s own experiences and views, rather than simply considering how marketers and advertisers approach them and influence children’s popular culture. Young children’s popular culture takes place in particular cultural and social contexts. Since my intention here is not to show generalisation or representation of young children’s popular culture in Japan as a whole, it is necessary first to describe where and how my research was conducted.

The ethnographic fieldwork was carried out for a total of five months in two local preschools (hoikuen) in my home town, Fukuoka, the sixth largest city in Japan with 1.3 million inhabitants. A five month ethnographic study can be considered relatively short in the anthropological tradition where the researchers spend a more prolonged period in the field. My fieldwork methodology is therefore termed as “focused ethnography” – a peculiar form of sociological ethnography that is different from the anthropological tradition in the sense that it is characterised by relatively short-term field visits (Knoblauch, 2005). I used focused ethnography because of its applicability for “ethnography at home” where researchers have vast implicit and explicit background knowledge of the field they are studying and focus on small elements of their own society instead of culture of a complete unknown society (Knoblauch, 2005).

As I was originally from Fukuoka and my gender (female) and age (early 30s) correlated with the preschool teachers’, this placed me in a good position to be accepted and
supported by the gatekeepers – teachers and parents, and also enabled me to be at ease with the children. I took an observer-as-participant role (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) in the preschool classes which allowed me a certain degree of participation in children’s peer culture and kept the door open for me to join their conversations and activities whenever they invited me. The age group of the classes was between 3 and 5; one preschool had multi-age classrooms and another had age-based. There were between 22 and 27 children, both boys and girls, in one classroom. The observation took place for 5-8 hours, three days a week: I sat with children during formal activities, played with them in free time and conducted open-ended interviews following their on-going conversations.

Long-term data collection as is common in conventional ethnographies is substituted for by intensive data collection in focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005). The qualitative data based on children’s narratives and interactions were audio-visually recorded or written in fieldnotes, and were later on carefully transcribed and translated from Japanese to English by myself. In order to analyse and interpret the data, transcripts and typed fieldnotes were categorised into different ideas. Categories were generated through open coding categorisation (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) with a point of departure in existing literature and also from the research data itself. The initial codes that were identified were compared, and then overlapping ideas were framed by broader thematic groups. In the process of analysis, it was necessary to constantly triangulate my observation data by using other theoretical and empirical literature to increase the validity of the research.

Young Children’s Character Culture
Young children’s peer culture in Japan cannot be discussed without recognising and acknowledging the central importance of merchandised characters (Bandai, 2010). I heard a lot of claims of what they have and what they are getting like the boy’s announcement quoted above: “Once this one [Anpanman fork case] gets broken, I’m getting a Shinkenger one!” At first I was not sure how to respond to such declarations by children, because in my daily interactions, at least with adults, nobody comes to me and starts a conversation with “You know what? I’m getting…” His conversational entry is not so much about his intention to flaunt his purchasing power or strive for a superior status, I argue, but rather to seek connectedness through the cultural repertoire of popular TV animation characters
shared among peers. Children’s claims of characters were in fact mostly used for conversational entry.

From the first day of my fieldwork in the preschool, many children were eager to show me their preschool supplies; from their lunch boxes, water bottles, hand towels, shirts, even underwear by flipping their skirts or pulling down their trousers. Without knowing the children’s intentions and expectations in doing this, I usually gave positive comments to all the goods, saying things like “That’s great!” or “That’s nice.” It did not take a long time to realise one crucial aspect of these presentations of their belongings. What they wanted to show me above all were the characters attached to all their belongings. In fact, they emphasised specific character names by showing the actual goods to me, saying “Look! I have Decade!” or “Look! Precure!” They sometimes seemed to expect me to know what characters were attached to their belongings by simply saying “Look!” while pointing at an object. In order to learn about young children’s culture, I had to make a conscious effort to familiarise myself with popular character names and to find out where they came from. Many of them definitely came from TV animation programmes – especially those in the children’s television block provided by TV Asahi on Sunday mornings, which include superhero series and magical girl series – and some were licensed characters found in various kinds of products targeted particularly at young children. The number of different characters I noted in one preschool was 23 for boys and 30 for girls, while 13 characters were used both by boys and girls.

Some characters are more popular than others; some might not have names or are not even recognised by young children. In fact, Snoopy – a well-known character in Japan – was not recognised among the children I observed. This led me to wonder how children would describe their belongings if the character (illustration) did not have a specific name or did not fit into their character categorisation. When I was writing down the character names of children’s water bottles while the children were drinking water at each group table, I found one water bottle which had a lot of animal pictures, but definitely not TV related animation characters, next to where a boy called Shō was sitting. Interested in hearing his description, I intentionally asked Shō ‘what kind’ of water bottle he had:

Me: Hi Shō! Can I see your water bottle?
Shō: Yeah!
Me: What kind of water bottle do you have?
(Shô stares at his water bottle for a second with a puzzled look on his face.)

Shô: Ummm… There are a lot of animals… you know… Here is Miss Rabbit, this is Mr. Mouse, this is Miss Bear, this is Miss Elephant… (pointing at each animal on the water bottle)

Kôki (boy) was listening to our conversation at the same table and also looking at Shô’s water bottle, but once Shô started mentioning common nouns on the water bottle, Kôki left the table saying “So what?”

I wonder if Kôki would have had the same reaction, leaving the table and saying “So what?” if Shô had been talking about popular or at least well-known characters. One interesting strategy Shô took in the conversation with me is that he personified those animals by adding the suffix (prefix in English) of ‘Miss (san)’ and ‘Mr. (kun).’ The tendency to attach the suffix to animals and even to inanimate objects is quite common among young children, but his switching suffixes between ‘Miss’ and ‘Mr.’ indicates his intention of familiarising the monotonous animals in order to draw more attention from the listeners. In fact, Shô’s eyes uneasily observed Kôki’s reactions more than mine. Generally, children expressed their willingness to join a conversation when its topic was interesting to them, especially when we were talking about the latest animation characters. Their fascination with merchandised characters was obvious in children’s responses to my questions when I asked them what they had or what kind of object they had. Their descriptions were not particularly associated with the shape, colour or texture of the objects, rather with character names. Having recognisable characters is crucial to enable preschool children to attract attention from others or stay ‘in tune’ with peers. Having and knowing about something all your peers know about, especially popular characters, is the key to gaining dignity and recognition of ownership. In the process, this particular possession and knowledge becomes a silent visual appeal and representation of the self.

Having and Knowing: Looking for Sameness

Young children are experts when it comes to finding ‘sameness’ – having the same character goods, going to the same shopping mall, watching the same TV animations – because it automatically brings conformity and a sense of sharing. As Christensen and James (2000: 169) argue:
A sense of sameness is important for children, providing for them a feeling of belonging, a way in which to smooth over the potential which any personal diversity or deviation might have to rupture the social relations that exist between one child and another.

Having the same popular media and licensed character goods especially evoked immediate connection and intimacy. ‘Sameness’ attracts children, although this similarity-attraction paradigm (see Byrne, 1971) is hardly a recent recognition: it was Aristotle who asserted that “[w]e like those who resemble us, and are engaged in the same pursuits … We like those who desire the same things as we” (quoted in Byrne, 1971: 24). This paradigm would note that children are attracted to those who like the ‘same’ character goods and characters with a ‘similar’ categorical value because there is a speculation that they will also have similar attitudes and experiences. Dittmar (1992: 92) supports the association between material possessions and social interactions by pointing out that “material goods are used to make inferences about others’ identities” and to “anticipate what kind of interaction to enter into”: sameness offers children to establish their economy of dignity.

It can be argued that children tend to build relationships quickly, not least by making connections through shared possessions. In the absence of relatively stable and sustained commitments, young children’s friendships consist of sets of momentary ‘samenesses,’ and their search for something ‘same’ is one strategic approach in the process of making and maintaining friendships. The following conversation of two girls, Saori and Kiyona, illustrates an interesting aspect surrounding this sameness:

(Children are changing to their pyjamas for nap time, and Saori shows me her shirt once she has taken off her smock.)

Saori: Look! Since I don’t have my smock on, you can see a HeartCatch PreCure T-shirt! (pulling the bottom of the shirt so I can see the picture well)

Me: The girls are cute! Who are these two girls?

Saori: Pink is Cure Blossom and blue is Cure Marine!

Me: Which one do you like better?

Saori: Cure Blossom…

(Kiyona who is changing her clothes next to Saori joins our conversation.)

Kiyona: I… I like… I like Marine better!!! She is cuter! (looking carefully at Saori’s shirt) Heey! I have the same T-shirt!
Saori: Really? Can you put it on tomorrow?  
Kiyona: Yeah! You should wear the same one, too!!  
Saori: But... but this one needs to be washed... So, after tomorrow!

The way Kiyona joins our conversation is very smooth and natural even without her having looked at Saori’s shirt. The most effective strategy for children to enter a conversation or a play scenario is based on how smoothly they can sell their face – gaining attention while taking part in and fitting into its flow through monitoring. In order to be successful in joining in, they have to be confident in demonstrating their cultural knowledge in an appropriate communicative manner. Their statement needs to be within the ‘same’ contextual repertoire, in this case, HeartCatch PreCure\textsuperscript{5}. Therefore, while Kiyona picks a different favourite character from Saori’s, this difference does not seem to matter too much to them; rather, naming their own favourite reveals a tacit understanding between the two girls that they both like HeartCatch PreCure. Sharing the same social cultural world makes an immediate connection between them. Their interpersonal relationship becomes more intimate when Kiyona finds out that she actually has the ‘same’ shirt as Saori. They agree to wear the ‘same’ shirt on the ‘same’ day, but I never saw them wear it on that arranged day or afterwards. From this empirical evidence, I argue that the moment of sharing and maintaining a relationship through ‘sameness’ is most important to them, not the sustained future relationship involving promises and commitments. By sharing the same possession and knowledge, they acknowledge each other’s economy of dignity, mutually confirming a feeling of ‘being worthy.’

One of the ways in which young children’s friendship is affirmed and reaffirmed is mostly through these manifestations of ‘sameness’ and ‘compatibleness.’ It is usually associated with the actual existence of a material possession in the classroom but children also used their past sharing of sameness to confirm their present connectedness. During one lunch time, Hinata (girl) suddenly told me that her chopsticks were the same as Yume’s (girl). Since the ones Hinata was holding were Hello Kitty and Yume’s were Sugarbunny, I made sure with Hinata of her declaration of ‘sameness.’ Hinata said: “They are home today,” and Yume nodded “Yeah, we have the same ones, right?” with a friendly smile to Hinata. Preschool children have a desire to find a relational connectedness through having and knowing the same things, but at the same time they are very
concerned about differences – what others have/know and what I do not have/know – because others’ ‘sameness’ could exclude the self from others.

The variety and complexity of character worlds make for rich conversations, providing a lot of opportunities for children to achieve and sustain their social positions by engaging in face-work – sharing information with others and showing off their knowledge. This knowledge is restricted to a large extent to the logic of character naming. By saying the names, children demonstrate that they are in the know, which gathers dignity in public, and that is why there is so much pleasure and excitement simply in referring to the names of the characters. The following example shows Kiyona’s concern about what she does not have or know. At one lunch time, Kiyona (girl) and Kotoha (girl) were taking out their lunch boxes and fork cases from their school bags and laying them out on the table:

(Kiyona points at Kotoha’s lunch box while she is away and asks me hesitantly.)

Kiyona: Do you know this character?
Me: No… (It says Miss Bunny but I am not familiar with the picture.)
Kiyona: I don’t know it either, but it must be popular because Seri, Saya and Hana have the same one…

The way Kiyona asks me, not Kotoha, a question about an unfamiliar character on the lunch box in the absence of its owner signifies Kiyona’s face-work: it is a means of saving her dignity. Her uncertainty stems from her social standing – the possibility that she might not belong to the circle of ‘sameness’ the three girls share, not only due to her lack of possession of the character goods but also her lack of knowledge. Kiyona is a girl who was generally confident in leading a conversation and play among peers by proclaiming her ideas and sharing broad consumer/media knowledge - as is illustrated in the way she joined the conversation about HeartCatch PreCure and its T-shirt between Saori and me smoothly above. However, because of her awareness of her own social competence in her everyday interaction with her friends, she might have been threatened by her unfamiliarity with a character that looks popular and at least three girls in her class owned. As this implies, it is not only owning the same things but also sharing knowledge about characters that provides the members of peer culture with a sense of conformity and belonging.
Ways to Find out, Ways to Belong

Children’s efforts to maintain their “economy of dignity” entail a range of processes, from possessing certain character goods, presenting popular character names including both old and latest ones, talking about their shopping trips and vacations with their family, to announcing gift-receiving. Something that most matters to children is when and how to display those possessions, knowledge and experiences, and how to deal with unknown and unfamiliar territory in the peer group. Some children manage to get through an awkward and embarrassing moment by listening or even pretending that they are ‘in the know’ with smiles and nods, but others attempt to find out what their peers are talking about. It is of course better to ‘find out’ than to ‘pretend to know’ because appearing not to know can lead to losing face. The action of ‘finding out’ most likely triggers the chance for the novice’s inclusion and for the sharing of the moment in the conversation, in addition to acquiring new knowledge. Yet, children’s strategy is obviously not to say aloud that they are not in the know – which would announce their own shame and difference from others - but rather to make a calm and timely approach toward a peer/peers, who are then less likely to create a problem.

The extract below shows a girl’s tactics to obtain knowledge of something she had no idea about. Rina (girl), like most of the preschool girls, was very much fond of HeartCatch PreCure. Rina had her preschool supplies emblazoned with images of HeartCatch PreCure and seemed confident about her knowledge. However, one day at the lunch table she saw Kiyona’s (girl) fork case with girl characters similar to HeartCatch PreCure. They were actually from Fresh Pretty Cure (2008-2009) which was broadcast one year before HeartCatch PreCure (2010-2011). Rina carefully attempted to find out what those characters could be after having stared at Kiyona’s fork case for a while at the lunch table:

Rina: Kiyona, which one do you wanna transform into? (pointing at Kiyona’s fork case)
Kiyona: This one. (pointing at a girl with purple hair, with her chopsticks) What about you?
Rina: Ummm… this, no no! This one! (pointing at a girl with orange hair first but then changes to a girl with yellow hair)
Kiyona: Nice.
Rina: What is this one called? (pointing at a small white animal-like figure around the Pretty Cure girls)
Kiyona: This is Chiffon.

(Rina glances at Kiyona’s face, checking that she does not seem to care too much about Rina’s question.)

Rina: What about this? (pointing at a Pretty Cure girl with purple hair)

Kiyona: Cure Berry.

Rina: And this? (pointing at a girl with yellow hair)

Kiyona: Cure Peach. This is Cure Pine, and this is Chiffon. (pointing at each character with her chopsticks)

In children’s interactions and conversations, it is quite unusual for them to ask direct questions at first hand; such as “What is this/that?” Rather, many children carefully observe an object under discussion (if there is one), and pay attention to the conversational gambits and emotional expressions of others. Rina uses a range of strategic face-work tactics in the conversation. First, she must have speculated what those magical girls on the fork case could be, based on her knowledge of HeartCatch PreCure, and therefore, asks a question about which one Kiyona wants to transform into. This approach leads Kiyona to answer naturally without sensing Rina’s lack of knowledge, but Rina is not able to get the names of the other characters or further information. So, again, she chooses to take another way to find out by asking the name of a minor character instead of the main girl characters. Rina’s glance at Kiyona, whose calm expression must have made her feel secure, becomes a turning point to finally touch upon her main concern, finding out who exactly those girls are: gaining knowledge is certainly the process of establishing her economy of dignity.

It is more difficult for a child to find a way to get to know something s/he does not know especially when a group of peers is sharing their knowledge and is in an enthusiastic conversation. At a table of five boys, all aged 5, during snack time, Köki suddenly brought up the latest character, Usavich, which was only broadcast on cable TV and also found on DVDs. Besides having been broadcast since 2008 on cable TV, the popularity of Usavich has been gradually highlighted through its spin-off products that served as a trigger for me to get to know its characters. In the following conversation, four boys except for Mitsuki claim that they know Usavich and make themselves present in the conversation by making comments on it. Like Rina who asked a question in a tactical way, it is interesting to see
how Mitsuki ensures that he is included in the group conversation with a question about its availability on TV, after having listened to his peers’ conversation for a while:

Kōki: Who knows Usavich?
3 boys: I doooooo!
Kōki: The pink one is stronger. Usavich dances like this!! (holding his elbows with each hand and swinging his body like a Cossack dance)
Shō: The green one is funny!
Me: Green one? Is there also a green one? I thought there were pink and white rabbits.
Shō: There is a green one!
Kōki: The one that wears a green T-shirt!
Me: Oh ok! I don’t remember the colour of their clothes!
Kōki: Have you watched Usavich, too?
Me: Yeah! After you told me about Usavich, I searched for it.
Tenta: Usavich is very funny!
Kōki: There are also an ugly chick and a frog! The chick has a blue moustache!
(Mitsuki looks at Hiroto sitting next to him and asks in a quiet voice.)
Mitsuki: What day is that on TV, Hiroto?
Hiroto: Ummm… it’s not on TV…
Kōki: I rent the DVDs! You can watch Usavich on DVD!
Shō: Yeah, you gotta rent it!

Characters in Japan are not always associated with TV programs but are often supported by flexible interrelationships between products, or what are termed ‘media-mixes’, in comics, computer/mobile games and a wide range of licensed products (Ito, 2006). While all his peers at the table are commenting on Usavichi, Mitsuki does not speak out to the peer group, but rather keeps silent. Yet, on two occasions I witnessed him trying to find the chance to talk to Hiroto, sitting next to him. Mitsuki’s approach toward Hiroto, finally asking what day Usavich appears on TV, is a reflection of his careful observation of his peers, particularly Kōki, who more or less leads the conversation. Mitsuki must have presumed where he would be able to find Usavich from Kōki’s question about whether I had ‘watched’ it. Mitsuki’s strategic way of asking a question enables him to gain further information about the animation, instead of underlining his lack of inclusion stemming from
his unfamiliarity with Usavich: finding out what his peers know about a character is a way to belong and obtain his economy of dignity.

Children often seek to be invisible to others or pretend in order to ‘look like’ a member, a part of the interactional sphere, but in order to demonstrate their full membership, they have to ‘act like’ a member (Kantor et al, 1998) with a broad mastery of conversational/play themes and performances accepted by other peers. The face-work undertaken by Rina and Mitsuki illustrates that children both desire and struggle to be part of their peer culture not only by ‘looking like’ but also by ‘acting like’ a member through their careful monitoring and observation of others and asking relevant questions that flow with the on-going conversation. These attempts – to find out what others have, what others know, where and how those objects and knowledge are obtained, – allow an individual child to overcome his/her emotional uncertainty through participation as well as to break away from his/her invisibility among peers.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper has focused on how young children appropriate a sense of belongingness through their peer culture, particularly through possession of, and knowledge about, media-related and licensed characters. My research findings suggest that character culture – the possession of, and knowledge about, particular characters as well as their strategic use in peer communication – plays a particularly important role in young children’s involvement and sense of belonging in their peer group. In daily interactions and conversations, children engage in face-work in their efforts to be visible, audible, and therefore, present in their peer group, but at the same time strive to conceal their lack of involvement. Their “economy of dignity” – a feeling of being worthy to others (Pugh, 2009) – entails not just the attempt or desire to be similar to their peers, but an elaborate form of identity work which requires constructions of similarity and difference, and a socially negotiated identification of self and others (Jenkins, 2008; also see Giddens, 1991). As my empirical data demonstrates, on the one hand, children claim their possessions, knowledge and experiences in order to create and connect themselves to a ‘we’ network while excluding ‘others’; while on the other hand, children who are excluded have to first recognise that they are different, they are ‘others,’ and in order to be included in their peer group, they have to take a careful, often strategic approach, asking relevant questions
based on material and semiotic meanings in discussion which not only minimise their
marginality but also provide further useful information.

Children’s making and re-making of the meanings of character goods and knowledge
include dynamic, negotiable and flexible associations that are characteristic of their peer
culture. While certain forms of possession or knowledge work as relational currency for a
certain period, their meanings and values are never static, yet consistently and creatively
transformed and interpreted through their social relations. Young children’s presentations
of character consumption in their peer culture reflect the multiple trajectories of their
participation in the culture of products and meanings, and contribute to their understanding
of interpersonal relationships, and not least, of their position within the broader commercial
world.

Notes
1 The term ‘character’ (kyarakutā in Japanese) is a form of Japanese-English which is common in anime and
manga. Since I did not find any appropriate term for kyarakutā in English, I decided to transfer the meaning
of Japanese ‘kyarakutā’ to ‘character.’ It is my intention to differentiate character culture from anime culture
even though the implications of the two terms do overlap to some degree.
2 The “face” (prestige; honour; pride; status; dignity in Chinese) analysis is socio-linguistically elaborated in
3 There are generally two kinds of early child care and education services in Japan, yōchien and hoikuen.
While yōchien serve children ages 3 to 6 and are open from 9am to 2pm, hoikuen serve infants and toddlers
in addition to older children and are open for longer hours (7am-6pm) (also see Tobin et al, 2009: 140-141).
4 Television block is a strategy of broadcast programming which schedules similar TV programmes back-to-
back.
5 HeartCatch PreCure is one of the magical girl TV series broadcast on Sunday mornings, which took over
many features of Sailor Moon. It features a group of ordinary junior high school girls transforming to soldiers
with cute costumes and accessories; themes of friendship, interpersonal connectedness and love; magic-like
attack strategies; commercial products, especially toys, that are followed by story lines; and seasonal
retooling (Allison, 2006).
References


