

The Inner Dynamics of Kidult Culture: Trending Toys and games, Theme Parks, and Animated Movies

Peiying GU ^{1,a*}, Wenrui LIANG ^{2,b}

¹School of Art, The University of Edinburgh, 74 Lauriston Place, Edinburgh, EH3 9DF

²Department of Media and Communication, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 50603

Abstract. Trending toys, Disneyland, animation movies, which are traditionally connoted as children's synonymous entertainment, have progressively gathered a growing number of elder children and adults, which is called Kidult. This article analyzes and interprets kidult culture from three types of phenomena in an attempt to understand and explore the inner factors of the contributors. Meanwhile, it also provides aesthetic instructions and practical implications for the kidult-derived cultural and creative industries.

1. Introduction

In the multicultural context of contemporary society, an interesting social phenomenon is rapidly becoming a trend. An increasingly number of adults are keen to purchase toys that suit the psychological profile of children as well as the trending toy shop, blind box vending machine and Game consoles experiencing shop is popping up on the streets and shopping malls, products that focus on toy co-branding culture and concepts are being sought after and sold. Moreover, not only toys for adults, but also the world-famous theme parks, such as Disneyland park and the Universal theme park, which have a predominantly young visitor age distribution rather than the anticipated children.

Further research reveals that the popularity of animated films produced by these DreamWorks studios shows that the stereotype that animation is only for children is rapidly dissipating, with adults becoming one of the primary consumers of animated films¹. Besides, certain animated films targeted solely at adults have seen much higher attendance rates in theatres than those aimed at children. These contradict common perceptions of the concept of child pronouns.

Kidult, also known as Peter Pan Syndrome, is a term used in the West to describe a group of people who enjoy children's products or are eager to participate in childlike entertainment behaviour. In the review of domestic and international studies about Kidult, most of them based on the analysis of design and aesthetics, personality traits and cultural-historical causes and phenomena. The influence of Kidult's fashion products on adult purchases in society is explored, for example, through the dimensions of Kidult fashion emotion to identify the

socio-psychological characteristics², as well as a focus on the association of personality traits and decisions with Kidult's consumer behaviour based on the Big Five personality model³.

Author noticed that scholars have mainly studied the media environment in terms of the external context of media communication, mass consumption: 'find out the dimensions of kidult fashion emotion and identify the influence of socio-psychological characteristics'; and the post-modern context, in order to study the media environment's intervention in Kidult's childhood and the formation of consumer values, the transformation of consumer culture on the subjective demands and concerns of people, and the external factors of the new commercial capital operating in response to the psychology of the audience.

This article makes an attempt to interpret and analyze the concept and content of Kidult's favorite products from the perspectives of media cultural studies and psychoanalysis to better understand the inner dynamics of Kidult culture and the attributions inherent in Kidult's choice of such products and content phenomena. To comprehend the reasons for the emergence of Kidult culture, this article will also discuss three thematic tendencies from trending toys, theme parks, and animated movies.

1.1 What is "Kidult"

'Kidult' is a portmanteau of 'Kid' and 'Adult', which first appeared in the *Times* on 11 August 1985 in the article "Coming Soon: TV's New Boy Network". It has used to describe a type of child, young person and young adult². Besides, Wang and Ding believe that Kidult originally had two meanings: a child pretending to be

* Corresponding author: ^aArielgpy2022@163.com

^b 1697458702@qq.com

mature and a childish adult. The meaning used later on favored the latter, generally referring to the phenomenon of childish adults. In other words, adults with the mentality, innocent spirit, personality and fun of a child, or adults with a childish, childlike and naive heart. The term used today to describe the prevalent neo-adult condition can be translated as the Kidult². Although this term is more commonly associated with Europe and the United States, in Hong Kong, it refers to a social phenomenon in which a growing generation of adults (roughly described as those aged 30 to 40) enjoys having fun.

Jacopo Bernardini brought up that ‘the growing culture of infantilization that seems to have become one of the most recent hallmarks of postmodernity’⁴, and he used proposed ‘an infantilist ethos is achieved by correlating the postponing of the canonic indicators of maturity with the global market’ which was defined by Benjamin R. Barber⁵. Drawing on scholars, he points out that the Kidult phenomenon is mostly found in the generations X (born 1965-1980) and Y (born 1985-1995). Considering a contemporary perspective, what are the differences and further implications of the Kidult among the Z generation (born after 1995), which is now active as the mainstream?

Kidult is more than just a style. It is a way of life and a mentality⁶. Kidult culture has emerged due to an increasing number of young people recognizing and adopting this lifestyle attitude. From perspective media phenomena and cultural contexts⁷, the understanding of the motivations of the Kidult crowd’s behaviour is merely an interpretation and commentary on the phenomena generated in the operation of commercial capital to appeal to the audience, an external attribution from the mass media and postmodern contexts. There is still scope for theoretical research on the internal factors that motivate the Kidult population’s behaviour. The behavioural paradigm facilitated by Kidult buying trending toys, visiting theme parks and watching animated films has certain theoretical connotations(as figure 1).

culture and concept are also being pursued and sold, such as a power bank with the figure of Subor Famicom, Lego*IKEA peripherals, and cosmetics with anime co-branding. These childhood memories have been re-engineered and upgraded back into the hands of adults, partly as a factor of fondness, but another important reason may be the mechanism from Alfred Adler’s theory of overcompensation. Alfred Adler (1879- 1937) joined the psychoanalytic school that inherited and developed Freud’s Personality philosophy. However, Adler’s essential vision ran counter to Freud’s and he then created individual psychology, introducing the concept of overcompensation. Adler assumed that if an adult’s needs were not met as a child, they would continue to seek satisfaction of those needs throughout their lives, to the point of no return. If a child grows up in a poor or exceptionally materially deprived environment, he or she will spend the rest of their lives searching for material fulfilment⁸. The nostalgia for a certain childhood memory of a game even develops into an important deriving option of relaxation for adults. It is a common ground of reasoning that the call from deep in the brain makes people attached to and even dictates their behavior in the long term.

Other psychoanalysts have also made observations. The endowment effect proposed by Richard Thaler⁹ argues that if an individual owns an object, they will value it more than other objects of the same kind. They would be more cherished these things and consider them to be a part of themselves. Familiarity is more easily recognized and accepted, and thus judged by subjective intuition as ‘good’ and ‘right’. This is perhaps a result of the fact that those born around the millennium have a richer experience of childhood toys than previous generations. The chance to experience familiar childhood toys again in a contemporary context has the appeal of returning to the beauty of dreams.

Donald Woods Winnicott, a leading British psychoanalyst, also introduced the concept of Transitional Object in 1953, which refers to the child’s perception of particular natural material objects as extensions or substitutes for the mother, mediating the child’s transition from complete subjectivity to total objectivity¹⁰. A teddy bear can be used as a new anchor as an emotional projection for the mother throughout childhood, helping to alleviate the anxiety of separation from the mother as one learns to bond with the outside world. Adults who purchase many toys for this purpose may be compensating for unmet childhood needs and gaining similar emotional experiences from consumer behaviour and managed possession as they did as children. Besides, addictive consumption is gradually forming behind the popularity of blind boxes, as a high rate of personal reorder is a significant feature. Many consumers’ retaliatory toy consumption behaviour may be a means of recalling childhood, maybe a painful flashback to the subconscious, or a projection of attachment to past experiences to bring the ego-personality full circle.

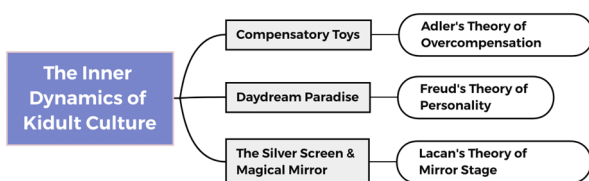


Fig1. The argument structure of Kidult’s Culture and CCI

2. Toys, Theme Parks, and animation movies

2.1 Compensatory Toys

Blind boxes, BJD (Ball-jointed Doll), Switch, PS4s, and other toys that suit children’s psychological profile are becoming increasingly popular among adults. Additionally, products that focus on toy co-branding

2.2 Daydream Paradise

‘Adults are just grown-up children’, Walter Disney once said. Based on LBS data sources such as GPS and WIFI probes from Quest Mobile¹¹, a prominent data service provider, the researcher selected the visitors who visited Beijing Happy Valley, Shanghai Disney park, Guangzhou Chime-Long Paradise and Shenzhen Windows of the World in July 2017(as figure 2), and analyzed the user profiles of the visitors, which were mainly aged 25-35. In particular, Shanghai Disneyland has a high percentage of visitors under the age of 24, indicating Shanghai Disneyland’s popularity among younger visitors.

Age Distribution of Populations in China's Top Four Amusement Parks

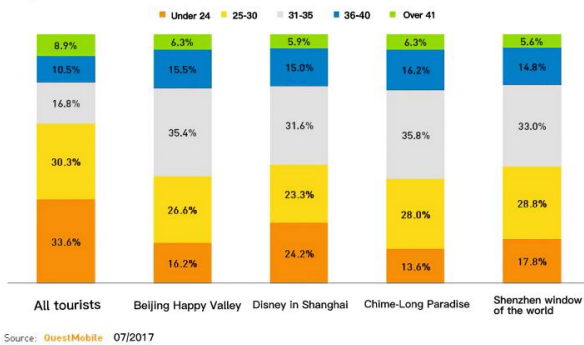


Fig2. Gender distribution of tourists at China's top four amusement parks¹¹

The founding figure of psychoanalysis, Freud’s Theory of Personality¹² confirms one point that a utopia where people can unleash their subconscious, imagine themselves as a princess or a magical figure, break free from bondage, expose their reality-repressed selves, and pursue the pure and simple pleasures of childhood. In *Creative Writers and Day-dreaming*, Freud describes creative fantasy as replacing for adults the playful activity of childhood, which like daydreaming, fulfils wishes. Therefore, the Kleinian school developed the theory of subconscious fantasy, arguing that creativity is often driven by symbolic and tinkering mechanisms. The subconscious mind is the uncontrolled behaviour and thinking of the human brain, of which the reasons for its formation have much to do with behavioural patterns formed by innate and childhood experiences. If the human psychological structure is compared to a floating iceberg, it is a massive part of it that lurks beneath the surface. The ego is the personality of primal desires represented by the subconscious, which in Freud’s opinion(as figure 3), is one of the most primitive and authentic personalities a person can have. Moreover, dreams are a great way to reveal the subconscious in the Self. Kidult’s appearance is partly a replay of a latent inner daydream. This will be converted into reality through artistic creation, and an amusement park with an immersive experience is an excellent way to recreate the dream.

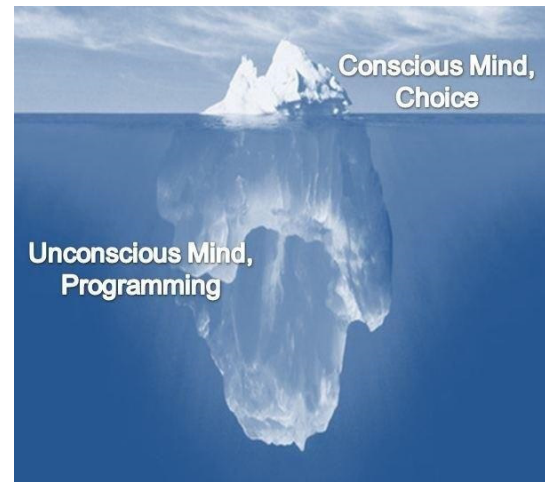


Fig3. Freud's topographical map of the subconscious and consciousness

2.3 The Silver Screen and Magical Mirror

In the book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, American scholar Neil Bozeman argues that the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is rapidly blurring. Moreover, as television’s medium pushes literacy to the margins of culture and replaces it at the centre of culture, a new concept of young adulthood begins to emerge¹³. Disney, the world’s leading brand of animated films, released its first animated film in 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which took three years to produce and has become an iconic classic in the history of animated films as well as a memory for a generation. With the subsequent Princess series and the gradual rise of animation studios such as Pixar Animation Studios and Sony Pictures Animation, animated films are no longer the preserve of children, and more and more adults are becoming attracted to them. Besides, personal media tastes are generally difficult to change once formed in childhood and youth. Because cartoons or animated films heavily influenced adults as children, the patterned character images, scene styles, narrative styles, thematic ideas, and spiritual connotations of the films were unconsciously accumulated and preserved in their memories. After sifting years, separation and integration, they formed the perceptual schema and viewing habits of this generation¹⁴. Animated films made for Kidult became a trend, and the fact that adults became the new audience for animation was gradually accepted, a phenomenon closely related to the mirror stage theory proposed by Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis.

The film is the art of dreaming. Based on the Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage theory, Christian Metz has creatively applied psychoanalysis to film studies. He considers film as a valuable text that serves as a mirror for the full range of human consciousness and unconscious impulses, and a mechanism of identity for human self-knowledge¹⁵. Three stages of development from infancy to adulthood are explored in Jacques Lacan’s mirror theory, and proposed three concepts of the real, imaginary, and symbolic realms. The baby gradually builds up a new perception of self by seeing its reflection

in the mirror, up to a complete personality concept. Jacques Lacan uses the real world of the unconscious, the imaginary world of the preconscious and the symbolic world of consciousness to express the psychological structure of the subject, while Christian Metz borrows the distinction between the real, imaginary and symbolic worlds for the study of film¹⁵. This stage is a fluid transitional process in which people, in their dealings with the outside world, project themselves onto the relative other, which is not necessarily a person but can also be media forms, literature and art, ideology, etc. The process of watching animated films is a process of adult projection of the self, similar to seeking self-identity as a child. The process of watching animated films is also the process of reliving childhood dreams, the form of watching the screen is similar to looking in the mirror, as Snow White stands in front of the magic mirror, so that people walk into the magic mirror in this way with animated films, forgetting the pressure of reality for a short time to be in the mysterious world of fairy tales. It is a mirror image of the human psyche and unconscious instincts¹⁵ and a mirrored expression of human psychological and instinctual desires¹⁵. Arnheim's visual form dynamics also supports the view that film and television images show co-occurring force patterns and ephemeral force patterns. When adults go to the cinema to watch an animated film that resembles their inherent perceptions, they develop a sense of heterogeneous and homogeneous viewing pleasure¹⁴. This is the reason why they choose animated films for their strange perceptual experience.

The impact of digitalization, technology and media advancement also grounded thinking about Kidult culture. In the book *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, Merovitz explores that how electronic media blurs the distinctions between adults and children, explaining how the adult state appeals to children's behavior and how adult minds affected by media retain childhood preferences. Thus, the movement of technology and new media has given the fractured memory a more vibrant and vivid character of presence, which is the era and technological trigger that catalyzed Kidult culture.

3. Conclusion

In contemporary art and cultural communication, there may be a possibility that in the current age of artificial intelligence, new forms of Kidult's culture will emerge from new technologies such as virtual reality, NFTs, deep learning and Generative Adversarial Network. The three behavioral modes represented by Kidult mentioned above, in which members buy trending toys, visit Theme parks and watch animated movies, can be interpreted from a psychoanalytic approach to explain the connotations of their formulation also had critical meaning for us.

When dealing with the concerns and consumption habits of the Kidult people, it is not just a matter of focusing on superficial seasonal fashion and replicating what existed in the past, but also on the deeper spiritual

needs. It is possible to divide the user group and profile from the missing core of Kidult people's childhood, to develop concern from understanding and meet them in caring.

Turning from the study of the phenomenon to the deep psychological constructs can also provide a new orientation and direction for cultural innovation. Focusing on deconstructing Kidult culture from the audience's perspective, constantly identifying themes, tracing development tracks, exploring and recreating scenarios in will provide creative and inspiring thinking on the product design and development of toys, the concept and conception of parks, and the narratives and filming of animated movies. It also helps to provide aesthetic instructions and practical implications for the emergence and prosperity of the creative industry model based on Kidult extension.

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