

## Abstract

How Characters Influence Mothers' Childcare for Their Infants and Toddlers:

M-GTA Analysis of Mothers' Character Use

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### 1. Introduction

In Japan, there have been intermittent explosive booms in popular culture, such as Hello Kitty around 1996, Yuruchara in 2007, and Pokémon GO globally. In the current media landscape where various devices and platforms are widely used, people have more touchpoints with these characters. Companies that launch character contents plan cross-media strategies to develop specific content on multiple media. Thus, characters are available on media such as smartphones, comic books, TV animation, game devices, and other daily commodities. Furthermore, in Japan, characters are part of daily life not only for children but also for adults. Companies plan content applying a top-down strategy and consumers expand these franchises organically by creating fan fiction and other fan-based creations. These aspects are unique to Japan (Steinberg 2015).

Content is legally defined as “part of deliverables produced by creative human activities which belongs culture and amusement” (Act on Promotion of Creation, Protection, and Exploitation of Contents). Generally, content franchises are understood as content information on various media platforms. Additionally, characters are personas defined as images in comic books or animation (Odagiri 2010), and manga research defines characters as possessing individual or unique [1] appearances that show identity, [2] names, and [3] attributes for characterization, as well as being [4] repeatedly used and recognized in the world (Otsuka 2017). Characters are part of franchise contents and help connect contents across media and platforms (Steinberg 2013; Azuma 2001).

In Japan, many people follow characters, who have an important role in content and merchandising success, but there are few studies focusing on the effect of characters on peoples' lives. Considering people's lifestyles are deeply connected to characters, it is important to address this gap in research, as this study attempts to do.

## 2. Purpose

Lots of characters who are still popular first appeared in the 1980s, such as those from Tokyo Disneyland, Nintendo video games, and Studio Ghibli movies. Children who experienced these franchises grew up to be parents. Now, their infants and toddlers have touchpoints with various characters through picture books or smartphones.

In this study, I research how parents are using characters with whom they grew up and reveal how mothers who purchase daily life commodities and control media touchpoints start using characters and what kind of changes happen in how mothers use these characters with their infants or toddlers.

## 3. Results and Discussion

In this study, I conducted interviews with mothers of infants and toddlers. The mothers were all in their thirties and tended to have high educational achievements and high income. Implementing the modified grounded theory approach analysis to process the interview data identified a series of processes that mothers use to select characters in childcare.

First, before children express their own interests, mothers have childcare images and character preferences based on their childhood experiences. When children found characters they loved, mothers realized their children's growth and changes and felt joy. Then, as mothers became more confident using those characters in childcare, they began to understand their children's interests and future friendships.

## 4. Conclusion

These results reveal that characters can be a cultural and social relationship asset supporting childcare, and childcare assets are changing according to social trends. Characters as childcare assets affect how mothers make decision for their children and how they transform to better understand their children. This transformation of mothers' interactions with their children has two steps: [1] children's growth and changes are visible, prompting their mothers to feel joy, and [2] mothers feel joy and have confidence in their childcare strategy, then start understanding their children better.

Children's daily commodities are purchased by their mothers or other family members and

children do not immediately have opinions. However, mothers introducing characters is not a one-way process of choosing and giving; it is a composite decision-making process as mothers select and then change their mind after they recognize children's growth and changes.