

Effects of identification with comic book heroes and villains of consumption on materialism among former comic book readers

[About ACR](#) | [Join ACR](#) | [Conferences](#) | [ACR Grants](#) | [JACR](#) | [ACR Films](#) | [TCR](#) | [Resources](#) | [Search Conference Proceedings](#)

Effects of Identification With Comic Book Heroes and Villains of Consumption on Materialism Among Former Comic Book Readers

Russell W. Belk, University of Utah

ABSTRACT - Although a recent content analytic study (Belk 1987) has found archetypal heroes and villains of consumption in American comic books since the 1940s, it leaves unanswered the question of what the effect of these treatments may be on readers. The present study sought to investigate such effects among current college students by measuring identification with these comic book characters and relating such preferences to materialism traits. Results show expected negative effects on materialism for identifications with heroes of consumption, but find a somewhat more complex relationship between villain identification and materialism.

[to cite]:

Russell W. Belk (1989) , "Effects of Identification With Comic Book Heroes and Villains of Consumption on Materialism Among Former Comic Book Readers", in *NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 16*, eds. Thomas K. Srull, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 414-419.

[direct url]:

<http://acrwebsite.org/volumes/6938/volumes/v16/NA-16>

Advances in Consumer Research Volume 16 1989 Pages 414-419

EFFECTS OF IDENTIFICATION WITH COMIC BOOK HEROES AND VILLAINS OF CONSUMPTION ON MATERIALISM AMONG FORMER COMIC BOOK READERS

Russell W. Belk, University of Utah

ABSTRACT -

Although a recent content analytic study (Belk 1987) has found archetypal heroes and villains of consumption in American comic books since the 1940s, it leaves unanswered the question of what the effect of these treatments may be on readers. The present study sought to investigate such effects among current college students by measuring identification with these comic book characters and relating such preferences to materialism traits. Results show expected negative effects on materialism for identifications with heroes of consumption, but find a somewhat more complex relationship between villain identification and materialism.

COMIC BOOK HEROES AND VILLAINS OF CONSUMPTION

Heroes and villains are important for several reasons. As Klapp (1962) notes, heroes and villains are social types by which we pass judgments on ourselves. They express cultural values by representing that which the society reveres as being admirable and desirable as well as that which the society fears and considers to be deviant. McCracken (1988) speaks of a culture projecting its values onto a mythical golden age of the past when life is imagined to have been ideal. Similarly, our heroes and villains allow us to encapsulate our values by involving these reified social types in mythical battles where the "good" inevitably triumphs over the "evil".

Comic book heroes and villains are little different in these respects than the heroes and villains of Greek, Roman, Chinese, Christian, or Muslim mythologies. They are one of the twentieth century American equivalents of the mythologies of tribal peoples of North America, Australia, Africa, Melanesia, Oceania, Polynesia, and elsewhere. But perhaps even more strongly than heroes and villains of older traditions, comic book heroes provide role models that are potentially used by children in developing self images. Children and adolescents are the primary audience for comic books, formerly reading them most heavily from about age 11 to age 14 (Berger 1971, Murrell 1952, Witty and Moore 1945), but more recently from age 13 to age 18 (Anderson 1985, Sutin 1986). It is therefore likely that comic book heroes and villains are especially influential in the development of values and attitudes among a particularly susceptible age group, although probably not as susceptible as Wertham (1954) alleged in his early criticism of comic books.

The types of heroes and villains most commonly associated with comic books of years past are super virtuous, super strong super heroes like Superman, Batman, and Captain Marvel and arch-villainous criminal opponents who are out to rule the world (Baker 1975). Less recognized, but equally strongly characterized are what might be thought of as heroes and villains of consumption. Recent content analytic studies of comic strips and comic books conducted by Kassirjian (1983, 1984), Spiggle (1985, 1986), and Belk (1987) all identify materialistic themes as a major part of the content of these media. Belk (1987) found several prominent comic book series where such themes were strong enough to form the basis for defining the heroism and villainy of the characters

Classification of Comic Consumption Characters

Based on Belk's (1987) qualitative and quantitative content analyses, the most prominent of these characters can be classified as shown in Table 1. The heroes of consumption in these comics are unselfish, altruistic, intelligent, and hard working. The villains are selfish, greedy, uncaring, spendthrifts who rely on luck, magic, crime, or unearned wealth instead of hard work. Although Uncle Scrooge was initially modeled

after Dickens' Scrooge in A Christmas Carol, he is an ambiguous figure because on one hand he is avaricious, miserly, and exploitative (like Dickens' pre-transformation Scrooge), but on the other hand he is hard working, intelligent, and occasionally kind (at least in the last respect more like Dickens' post-transformation Scrooge). Mr. Lodge and Mrs. Rich are ambiguous because of inconsistent behaviors sometimes altruistic and kind, sometimes acquisitive and ostentatious. And Fox and Crow are both ambiguous characters for reasons explained by Belk (1987):

Fox was found to be four and one-half times more likely to act in a selfish than an unselfish manner, while Crow was found to be more than seven times more likely to act selfishly than unselfishly. Fox shows that he is able to achieve traditional success, but also shows a failing in continually wanting more. Crow shows admirable cleverness and cunning, but ultimately fails because he is unwilling to adhere to traditional rules for achieving success (Belk 1987, p. 31).

Like the crow in the fox and crow story from Aesop's fables, on which the series is loosely based, Crow is likable due to his cunning. He may thus appeal to child readers because he overcomes (at least temporarily) the more powerful and adult-like figure of the Fox. But Fox is likeable because he operates within the law and always "wins" by getting his revenge on Crow.

TABLE 1

CLASSIFICATIONS OF COMIC CONSUMPTION CHARACTERS

Effects of Comic Consumption Characters on Children

As Belk (1987) notes at the end of his content analytic study:

With such clear contradictions of values in these stories, readers have some clear value choices available to them. The stories themselves emphasize a traditional and conservative set of American values, but they depend upon readers identifying with the intended heroes. There is also a question of who reads these stories and what effect such reading may have on their materialistic attitudes. These must remain questions for future research (Belk 1987, p. 38).

If, for instance, readers identified more with the Beagle Boys in Uncle Scrooge than with Donald Duck or his nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie, the intended value messages of the stories have quite a different effect. Thus readers' liking of different potential role models among these heroes and villains of consumption needs to be considered.

In addition, it should be possible to detect differences in materialistic traits of comic book readers who identify with different characters in these stories. Since it is assumed that the consumption characteristics learned during childhood and adolescence should set a pattern for the reader's behavior as an adult, we should still be able to detect differences in materialistic traits of adult readers who had different preferences in comic book heroes and villains of consumption. These are the premises upon which the current study is based.

A STUDY OF FORMER COMIC BOOK READERS

The present study is based on a convenience sample of 129 undergraduate students from all majors and 154 MBA students at a major Western U.S. university. Thirty-one percent of the undergraduates were female and the median age was 22. Forty-two percent of the graduates were female and the median age was 27. Participants were asked to recall the extent of their comic book readership in the past. The modal ages reported of heavy (6 or more issues per year) comic book readership were 8 to 15 for the undergraduates and 8 to 12 for the graduate students. Because the results presented below are otherwise quite similar for graduates and undergraduates (and for males and females), the samples have been combined.

Fewer than one-fourth of the combined sample disagreed with the statement, "There was a time when I read comic books every week." This suggests that despite the decline in U.S. comic book circulations from 60 million issues per month in 1949 to 4 million per month before a 1980s rebound (Henry 1986), current college students were still frequent comic book readers. The figure is not too discrepant from figures before the drop in popularity of comic books when 15 percent of children were found to be indifferent or hostile to this medium, compared to 37 percent who reported that they were loyal comic book fans (Wolf and Fiske 1949).

The participants reported whether they liked or disliked those of 50 specified comic book characters with whom they were familiar. For the characters identified above as heroes, villains, or ambiguous characters (based on content analyses), results were as shown in Table 2. It can be seen that at least two-thirds of those questioned were familiar with each of the characters in the Archie series and each of the five major characters in the Uncle Scrooge Series. While more familiar characters were often better liked, this was not uniformly true. The results instead indicate that participants generally prefer the comic book characters who were classified as heroes in the content analysis results shown in Table 1. The sole exception is for the minor heroic character Freckles in the Richie Rich series, who is less well liked than the minor villainous character Mayda Money. Because these were also among the least well known heroes and villains in these series, it may be that the impressions of their likability is also less reliable than for others.

TABLE 2

PROPORTION LIKING FOCAL CHARACTERS IN FIXED ALTERNATIVE EVALUATIONS

It was not just that either wealthier or poorer people were uniformly more admired in these series. The wealthy Richie Rich and Uncle Scrooge were seen more favorably than the wealthy Fauntleroy Fox, Reggie (Archie series), Reggie van Dough (Richie Rich series), Mayda Money, Mr. Lodge, and Veronica. And the poor Archie Andrews, Betty, Jughead Jones, Donald Duck, nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie, Gloria Glad, and Peewee were seen more favorably than the poor Beagle Boys, Freckles, and Crawford C. Crow. The differentiating factors instead seem related to how wealth is regarded, sought, and used. When the wealthy are hard-working, honest, altruistic, kind, and not given to conspicuous or competitive consumption, the impression is most favorable. For the poor, the traits that seem to disqualify a character from reader identification are greed, envy, and deceitful or dishonest pursuit of wealth. The humble poor are much more admired, just as it is the humble rich are more admired. This suggests that perhaps we may be least comfortable when arrogance threatens the social structural status quo that is otherwise preserved by the humility of all concerned.

The next question to be addressed is the effect of liking these various heroes and villains of consumption on materialistic traits in readers. Because nearly half of the comic book characters studied were about evenly liked and disliked by the sample (40%-60% liked and 40%-60% disliked them), there was a good basis for paired comparisons of those who reacted to these characters positively and negatively. The dependent measures employed in these comparisons were the materialism scale and subscales (envy, nongenerosity, and possessiveness) developed by Belk (1985).

These scales have been found to have adequate levels of reliability and validity for exploratory research (Belk 1984, 1985, Rudmin 1988). They were further examined in the present study by having the graduate student sample indicate for a sample of 20 products and services

which ones they thought the average American adult regarded as a necessity that they must have rather than as a luxury that they could easily do without. Items included a car, a second car, a television, air travel one or more times per year,

TABLE 3

MEAN MATERIALISM SCORES FOR THOSE LIKING AND DISLIKING KEY CHARACTERS

three or more weeks vacation per year, a home computer, an audiocassette player, and a videocassette player. It was generally expected that the number of items regarded as necessities would be positively related to materialism. Actual correlations were:

Overall Materialism $r = .14$ ($p < .05$)

Envy $r = .01$ (NS)

Nongenerosity $r = -.02$ (NS)

Possessiveness $r = .24$ ($p < .001$)

These results are supportive, but indicate that possessiveness was the driving component of materialism that was related to tendency to regard consumer goods as necessities. On the other hand, O'Guinn and Faber (1987) find that envy and nongenerosity are most related to compulsive consumption tendencies and that compulsive buyers are not very possessive of their purchases. Together these studies suggest that these materialism scales have some predictive validity and may be effectively compared among those regarding the consumption heroes and villains of comic books either positively or negatively. These results are shown in Table 3.

Clearly those who reported liking consumption heroes were without contradiction less materialistic (and less envious, nongenerous, and possessive) than those who disliked these characters. In part, it was also found that those who liked villains of consumption were more materialistic than those who disliked these characters. This was true of the villains in the Archie series, but it was not true of the villains in the Uncle Scrooge and Richie Rich series. Rather than those who liked these villains being more materialistic, they were less materialistic. It may be significant that all of the latter villains (Gladstone Gander, the Beagle Boys, Reggie van Dough, and Mayda Money) seek to obtain wealth, fame, or success through non-legitimate means (e.g., including theft, luck, and trickery). On the other hand, villains Veronica and Reggie from the Archie series are portrayed negatively by the way they spend their wealth. They are thus more truly consumption villains rather than production villains like the others. The fact that consumption villains are liked by materialistic people, while production villains are disliked by these same people, suggests that only when consumption villains are appealing role models is greater materialism likely to result. Thus with this admittedly post-hoc distinction between production villains and consumption villains, the results all make sense.

CONCLUSIONS

While caution is urged in making any causal inferences from these associational findings and this limited sample, the number of significant differences in Table 3 suggests that there is a relationship between identification with consumption heroes and villains in comics and the materialistic traits of former readers. Coupled with Belk's (1987) finding of socially desirable treatments of wealth in the story lines of these comic books, there is some suggestion that these comic books may have a positive socializing influence on children, at least with regard to materialism. Those who report that they liked the heroic consumption figures (i.e., those figures who were more hard-working, honest, altruistic, kind, and not given to conspicuous or competitive consumption) scored lower on the materialism scale and subscales than those who disliked these characters. The fact that those who instead identified with villainous or ambiguous characters were not generally more materialistic than those who disliked these characters suggests that even when readers "misidentify" with intended villains, they are unlikely to develop negative materialistic traits themselves.

The tentative conclusion that comic books featuring themes of wealth do not increase materialism and may instead decrease materialism among readers, is no guarantee that these comics do not have other effects on consumers however. As noted by Belk (1987) in reviewing the battles over material goods between Fox and Crow:

The value of the material goods over which Fox and Crow disagree--meals, radios, televisions, automobiles, money, vacations, and other "prizes"--is never called into question (Belk 1987, p. 31).

Coupled with the weak correlations found in the present study between materialistic traits and the number of items thought by readers to be "necessities", it may well be that the mere display and vicarious consumption of wealth in these comics serve to legitimize high level consumption and reinforce an ever-expanding "standard package" of consumer goods (Riesman and Rosenborough 1955). This possibility however awaits further research.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Richard W. (1985), "Biff! Pow! Comic Books Make a Comeback," *Business Week* (September 2), 59-60.
- Baker, Ronald L. (1975), "Folklore Motifs in Comic Books of Superheroes," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin*, 4 (December), 170-174.
- Belk, Russell W. (1984) "Three Scales to Measure Constructs Related to Materialism: Reliability, Validity, and Relationships to Measures of Happiness," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 10, Richard P. Bagozzi and Alice M. Tybout, Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, 514-519.
- Belk, Russell W. (1985), "Materialism: Trait Aspects of Living in the Material World," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12 (3), 265-280.
- Belk, Russell W. (1987), "Material Values in the Comics," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14 (1), 26-42.
- Berger, Arthur (1971), "Comics and Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 5 (Summer), 164-177.
- Henry, Gordon M. (1986), "Bang! Pow! Zap! Heroes Are Back! After Decades in Decline, Comic Books are on the Rebound," *Time*, 128 (14), 62.
- Kassarjian, Harold H. (1983), "Social Values and the Sunday Comics: A Content Analysis," *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 10, Richard P. Bagozzi and Alice M Tybout, eds., Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, 434-438.
- Kassarjian, Harold H. (1984), "Males and Females in the Funnies: A Content Analysis," *Personal Values and Consumer Psychology*, Robert E. Pitts, Jr. and Arch G. Woodside, eds., Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 87-109.
- Klapp, Orrin E. (1962), *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

McCracken, Grant (1988), "The Evocative Power of Things: Consumer Goods and the Preservation of Hopes and Ideals," Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities, Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, chapter 7, 104-117.

Murrell, Jesse L. (1952), "Annual Rating of Comic Magazines," Parent's Magazine, 27 (November), 48.

O'Guinn, Thomas C. and Ronald J. Faber (1987), "An Exploration of the World of Compulsive Consumption: Correlates, Aetiology and Consequences," working paper, University of Illinois College of Communication.

Riesman, David and Howard Rosenborough (1955), "Careers and Consumer Behavior," Consumer Behavior, Vol. 3, Lincoln H. Clark, ed., New York: NYU Press.

Rudmin, Floyd W. (1988), "Ownership as Interpersonal Dominance: A History and Three Studies of the Social Psychology of Property," unpublished doctoral dissertation, Psychology Department, Queen's University.

Spiggle, Susan (1985), "7-up, Pepsi Art, and Sunkist Art," Advances in Consumer Research, Vol. 12, eds. Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Morris B. Holbrook, Provo: Association for Consumer Research, 11-16.

Spiggle, Susan (1986), "Measuring Social Values: A Content Analysis of Sunday Comics and Underground Comix," Journal of Consumer Research, 13, 100-113.

Sutin, Lawrence (1986), "Straight Talk About Comics," Sky (March), 58-64.

Wertham, Fredric (1953), Seduction of the Innocent, New York: Rinehart dc Company, Inc.

Witty, Paul and Dorothy Moore (1945), "Interest in Reading the Comics Among Negro Children," Journal of Educational Psychology, 36 (May), 303-308.

Wolfe, Katherine M. and Marjorie Fiske (1949), "The Children Talk About Comics," Communications Research, 1948-1949, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, eds., New York: Harper & Brothers, 3-50.
