

## **Global or Local Identity?**

**A theoretical analysis of the role of Viacom on identity formation  
among children in an international context**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Children around the world are growing up in a globalized environment influenced by many factors such as the internet, cell phones, and pop culture. One significant influence is the internationalization of television programming and as children's exposure to programs that originate in the United States increases it will undoubtedly impact how they understand themselves and their environment. The purpose of this essay is to explore the intersection among identity, globalization, and television. A case study into the internationalization of global media companies is Viacom Inc., which can be seen as a dominant source of global value orientation and a powerful contributor to the formation of an ambiguous identity among children and teenagers. We argue that new generations of children are developing a third identity – a fusion of local and global – an identity that transcends traditional ethnic and cultural boundaries.

**Key Words:** globalization, television, Nickelodeon, MTV, identity, children, teenagers

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##### ***Introduction***

In an era marked by a borderless, interconnected global economy, the result has been a truly integrated and accelerated communication across time and space. Between the force of global economic independence and electronic information this accelerated change makes the world, "...a burgeoning hybrid of cultures" (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000, p. 22). In this new global world, much of current literature has focused on the impact of media, economy, and business. The challenge, however, is to understand how children's perceptions of self and others may or may not be affected by the fusion of global and local culture.

Children around the world are growing up in a globalized environment influenced by many factors such technology, pop culture, and the world wide web. One significant force on the development of their identity is the internationalization of television programming. Since the deregulation of the audiovisual sector in many parts of the world during the 1980s, television systems have moved further away from a public service agenda and closer toward national level privatization. In addition, the expansion of satellites has given way to the growth of transnational networks available to young audiences in an international context. As Western based television genres saturate the global marketplace, children's exposure to programs that originate in the United States will undoubtedly impact how they understand themselves and their environment. In fact, Banerjee (2002) describes the reach of American television noting, "in every country in the world, American television programmes and films adorn screens. Whether it be in the remote villages in India or in the kampongs of Malaysia, American and Western cultural icons and

content make their overbearing presence felt” (p. 517). Globally, children interact with the symbols they see on television and incorporate these experiences into their daily reality. New generations of children are developing a third identity—a fusion of local and global – an identity that transcends traditional ethnic/cultural boundaries.

The purpose of this essay is to critically examine how identity has intersected with globalization, affecting the identity development of children in international contexts. As a case study, this paper will discuss Viacom’s history and impact on the global market, provide understanding of identity development, and explore Viacom’s role in the formation of a third identity.

### *Viacom’s International Expansion*

As one of the most aggressive international media corporations, Viacom, Inc. has made global growth and dominance its top priority. In 2005, Viacom CEO, Sumner Redstone, divested some of its media holdings, including the CBS network, creating an altered corporate structure, which now includes Viacom, Inc. and the CBS Corporation with separate governing boards. As a result of the split, Redstone remains the CEO of both corporations. The main focus of CBS Corp is broadcast television, radio and publishing. On the other hand, Viacom’s interest lies in cable networking. Viacom, Inc. has continued its vision for international expansion with its two key cable networks: MTV and Nickelodeon. Internationalization has become not only a mantra but an economic necessity for Viacom, given that cable networks account for 70 percent of Viacom’s revenue and most of its cash flow (Fabrikant, 2006). From an economic perspective, it is no surprise that Viacom aggressively markets its programs in an international setting; the concern to be addressed is the potential impact of Viacom’s programming on the development of children’s and teenagers’ identities.

Ongoing debates regarding the effects of the exportation of television programs have been critically examined within studies of international communication. Researchers argued that cultural imperialism may be a consequence of exposure to American programs resulting in the loss of local identity and culture (Schiller, 1993; Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham, 1996). However, these claims made by cultural imperialism theorists have been discredited on several grounds. As Chalaby (2006) notes, “critics showed that they did not stand up to scrutiny because of lack of research and thin evidence. It was also argued that the myth of strong effects was based on an archaic audience reception model, which assumed that ideology drips into people’s veins in the manner of a hypodermic needle” (p. 34). As research progressed, active audience theories grounded in social scientific research that looks at the predispositions of audience members to predict the likely influence of foreign media content have provided further evidence for the rejection of the cultural imperialism hypothesis (Elasmr, 2003). Here, audiences were treated as individuals who can create meaning from the text based on their particular circumstance. Still, what is missing from the evidence of cultural diffusion are questions related to power. In the world’s television system, certain players have privilege and can more easily and efficiently disseminate a message. These players are the transnational media corporations like Viacom who have the financial capabilities to expand globally.

As a result, other scholars explained the perceived impact of foreign media exposure by hypothesizing that the audience will negotiate their identity through a process of globalization (Kraidy, 1999; Moran & Chung, 2003), or identify with a hybrid identity influenced by global and local forces (Kraidy, 2002; 2005). Therefore, the academic discussion has moved from traditional views of cultural imperialism. Banergee (2002) describes this trend by arguing that, “recent international communication research is marked by a paradigm shift from the

determinations of media structure and content to an emphasis on the critical role of audiences in the consumption and interpretation of media content” (p. 522). The consequence of audience exposure does not necessarily mean a loss of local culture but the development of a new reality as a result of exposure to foreign programs in a local context. Nevertheless, audiences are bound by constructs that are limited by the ideologies presented in the texts that originate, particularly in the case of Viacom programming, in the United States. It is still true, however, that “popular culture can be seen to reflect the values of the nation from which it emerges” (Crothers, 2007, p. 66).

We must be careful to acknowledge that this is not benign interaction without consequence. Because children and teenagers may be more vulnerable and susceptible to the influence of television than adults, we should study them as a unique audience. As the number of global programs increases in the local market, the need to understand how children view themselves within the larger society is a necessity. Identity development is shaped and molded by group and societal influences (Chung, 1998) and among this age group, many are beginning to struggle and negotiate where they fit into their local environment while faced with an increasingly global culture.

In the case of Viacom, however, the glocalization process has happened at the production level, which may indeed complicate interpretation because for many the content of MTV, or even dubbed Nickelodeon cartoons, may not appear foreign. Viacom has been successful at localizing content because, according to Struabhaar’s cultural proximity theory (1991), audiences prefer local programming. Chalaby (2006) explains that “hybrid cultural artifacts can be the products of corporate strategies that aim to facilitate the adoption of international media brands by local audiences. All US media conglomerates have set their eyes on international expansion

and seek to increase their out-of-home revenue. Hybridization is a key to the success of this strategy, whether in music television or children's markets" (pp. 45-46). This hybridization of media texts impacts the identity formation among children in an international context. While children and teenagers are actively negotiating their identities, Viacom is interested in creating media products that will attract them; therefore Viacom indeed may influence the process of identity formation.

### *Identity Formation*

Every individual has a complete image of "self" that is largely a product of the interactions within his or her social environment. How an individual and a child views his/her self is cogently influenced by the significant persons within his/her social world (Espiritu, 1992). While culture plays the larger role in shaping our view of ourselves, it is through multiple channels that we acquire and develop our own values, ethics, norms, and ways of behaving in our everyday lives. For example, from our family, values and norms are passed on from one generation to the next. Parents teach their children the difference between right and wrong, and acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving through the language they use and through their actions. During the early years, children internalize what to value and devalue, what to appreciate and reject, and what goals are important in their culture through the influence of their family system. As previously mentioned, children are continuously influenced by the pervasive messages from popular culture and contemporary media. It is through the pervasive cultural value patterns--as filtered through the family and media systems--that the meanings and values of identity are differentiated and defined.

Theories of identity formation stem from the work of Erikson (1964; 1968), who focuses on the subjective sense of identity achieved through an experience of identity crisis. An identity crisis is



an internal war within an individual that serves as a form of “wake-up” call or awakening. Only by going through the process of self-achievement can an individual explore their unique abilities, options, interests, and religion. This ultimately leads to the commitment to develop a personal identity. As Erikson (1968) describes, “the young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity...between that which he conceives himself and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him” (81). Erikson’s conceptual model has been adapted and extended by a number of researchers who agree that a form of achieved identity stems from an awakening/crisis leading to a period of exploration and identity commitment (e.g. Marcia, 1966; 1980; Phinney, 1989). Marcia (1966, 1980) was the first to use Erikson’s model to describe in more detail the period of identity development among adolescents and young adults in terms of the process of synthesizing childhood identities.

The need to understand “who we are” with reference to the social group in which we belong is a complicated and internally driven question (Ting-Toomey, 1981). Past studies emphasize that ethnicity was a category that was manipulated by the political economy (Whitecotton, 1996), constructed through the process and adaptive nature of group bounding (Barth, 1969), and negotiated through situational contexts (Ting-Toomey, 1993). However, neglected in this area of research is understanding the blend of global and local identities. Ethnic identity is more subjective than objective and is viewed as a sense of group membership based on shared political and economic conditions. A popular theme in this literature holds that positive group interaction is an essential component of ethnic identity. This idea incorporates sociological and psychological perspectives, including theories of assimilation (Gordon, 1964), acculturation (Berry, 1980), and social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Mastro (2003) applied social identity theory to television viewing and noted that “entertainment television programming may be an important

consideration in determining attitudes toward outgroup races/ethnicities...[and] reinforce self-esteem through the process of social contrast in favor of the in-group” (p. 110). Ethnic identity has also been addressed as a developmental model. From this perspective, identity transformation occurs throughout the lifespan of an individual and is based on experiences of ethnic discovery (Cross, 1991; Parham & Helms, 1981). In addition, the process of identity formation is concerned with how individuals understand the implication of their ethnic identity (as noted by the Erikson 1968 discussion above; Phinney 1989).

In order to help explain how identity impacts global children is the identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1993). This theory views identity as a form of ethnic identity because an identity is contradictory in nature, operating as a type of dialectical pull. Specifically, dialectics are both conflicting and interconnected opposites which create tension (Montgomery, 1992). The contradictory state takes the form of a dialectical tension, which is “the simultaneous presence of two relational forces that are interdependent and mutually negating. Their interdependence is evident in that the forces define each other” (Montgomery, 1993, p.207). This tension, of seeking one pull over another, is anchored in the daily life and social practices of both children and adults. Ting-Toomey (1993) argues that ethnic identity as dialectic indicates the contradictory state regarding a sense of group belonging and a sense of individual needs. Thus, the ultimate challenge is to find the balance between both dialectical states. This tension, of ingroup membership and individuality, is anchored in the daily life and social practices of ethnic individuals. Ting-Toomey (1993) pointed out that:

Self-identification provides the motivational key to communicative actions. How we conceive our sense of self and how we want to be perceived by others are fundamental communicative questions. ... How we want to be defined by others and how our conversational partners want us to define them are expressed in and through communication processes. In addition, it is through communication that we can

reframe and modify our self-views. Thus, self-identification is maintained, re-created, and changed through mutual enhancement processes (p.76).

Our identities are in constant flux and continually negotiated. They are not static entities. The role of a television connection adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of identity in the 21st century, especially as children interact with texts that are presented as culturally ambiguous. Specifically, as children are presented with non-local identities, children may struggle with competing identities and the need to belong to the hybrid cool and hip “global” identity while feeling vulnerable with the “unhip” and “uncool” local identity.

*Viacom – Toddlers, Kids, Tweens and Teens Addicted!*

In recent years, the internationalization of children’s programming has been spurred by the concentration of ownership of global networks and an atmosphere of deregulation of media systems worldwide. In fact, “transnational media corporations are among the few companies that have the financial resources, management expertise, library of television shows (or news-gathering facilities) to operate television channels on a multinational level” (Chalaby, 2003, p. 464). Therefore, international trends in the audiovisual landscape include an increase in the number of private terrestrial channels, the loosening of government control over public stations, and the expansion of satellite networks. In Asia, for example, deregulation and liberalization have led to “many of the world’s largest transnational communication corporations...battling to capture a slice of the Asian market, which contains almost two-thirds of the world’s population and some of the fastest growing economies of the world” (Banergee, 2002, p. 517). It is because of the economic incentive of international expansion that globalization has been able to successfully support the global reach of television networks and transform a medium that was developed, in many parts of the world, as an extension of the state.

As a result of the international expansion of television networks, audiences have more program choices including a wide variety of U.S. programs created in part by Viacom. In fact, Redstone has been outspoken about his desire to make Nickelodeon and MTV the global entertainment choice for children of all ages. While Nickelodeon was launched in 1979 in the United State as a dedicated children's network, Nickelodeon has now exploded into the global marketplace by launching networks in a variety of languages in countries that span the globe (e.g., Germany, U.K., China, Mexico). According to the 2008 Nick International website, Nickelodeon is "...the world's only multimedia entertainment brand dedicated exclusively to kids." Furthermore, for the past 12 years, Nickelodeon has been the highest rated cable network in the U.S. (Viacom PR, 2004). Currently, the international network consists of 28 channels and 22 branded blocks of programs on terrestrial channels as well as 32 websites in a variety of languages. In fact, Nickelodeon, as a channel, is seen in 287.6 million households worldwide and with Nick programming aired on third party networks exposure increases to 673.6 million households (*Nick International*, 2008). Some of the programs that are popular around the globe include *Rugrats* (1991-2004), *SpongeBob Squarepants* (1999-present), and *Dora the Explorer* (2000-present). While some of these programs are no longer in production, they continue to be syndicated internationally.

According to Straubhaar and Duarte (2005), "kids networks are probably actually the most dependable for global or outside operations.... this is a difficult genre for national competition, since cartoons are very expensive to produce and easy to dub into other languages" (p. 246). This is an advantage for Viacom's teen and children's brands, because children are more likely to accept foreign or glocalized programming since they are least likely to be tied to the local

culture in ways that impact their television preferences. It is also difficult for national broadcasters to compete with Nick's stylized cartoons.

In September 2004, Viacom signed a deal with the CiTV, a private terrestrial television station in the UK, to broadcast *Dora the Explorer*. The program has been available through satellite channels across Europe and can be seen in France, Spain, Portugal and on Nick Nordic in Holland. The deal with the United Kingdom, however, provides much broader access for children who do not have cable or satellite television. In fact, Nickelodeon and MTV have become cable staples across Europe.

In an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of the cartoon series *SpongeBob Squarepants*, in 2004 Nickelodeon released *SpongeBob SquarePants, The Movie* in more than 30 countries around the world. The success of *SpongeBob SquarePants* is nothing less than a phenomenon. The television series has been sold into more than 135 markets around the world and has grossed 2.5 billion dollars in retail since debuting in 1999 (THQ ships *SpongeBob SquarePants*, 2006). More recently, the SpongeBob franchise released a new videogame to global audiences with special attention being given to Asia with high hopes of expanding more broadly in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and South Korea.

In an effort to reach viewers in the PRC, Viacom partnered with Beijing Television (BTV) and China Central Television (CCTV) to extend its Nickelodeon and MTV brands. Similar to most markets, Viacom uses local talent to create a portion of original local content for its international networks, but relies heavily on imported favorites like *Dora the Explorer* for younger audiences and MTV programs like *MTV Cribs* (2000-present) or *Jackass* (2000-2002). As Redstone stated in a Viacom press release, "...partnerships with Chinese companies are central to our long-term strategy, and Viacom's alliances with the two leading regional TV players – Shanghai Media

Group and now Beijing Television – represent a significant commitment to producing high quality, locally produced content for audiences in China and around the world” (4 September 2004).

In the race to be at the forefront of expansion and the leader of entertainment, Nickelodeon is tapping into the widely popular and profitable Japanese anime market. As Stewart (2006) reported, Nickelodeon’s interest to co-produce a Japanese-based animation will create a new breed of programming that can work in all global markets. Rather than spend money to import a completed product, U.S. companies are determined to have their input throughout the creative process. The benefit of the co-production is that the Japanese and U.S. groups can collaborate on the project during all phases of the production stage, rather than simply “repurposing” the product for international audiences. As a result, money and time can be saved by tweaking the product and avoiding translation issues. For example, if broadcasters want comedy from a Japanese anime, U.S. companies have learned that Japanese humor may not translate well to non-Japanese children. Instead, companies can inject their own humor early on in the scripting stage to avoid potential disaster (Stewart, 2006).

Many cheer MTV as the pioneer that localized its programming to be relevant to and for the local audience. “[MTV] is the most viewed music channel and the most active one in all markets [in Latin America], with multiple feeds, local productions and strategic associations to develop various promotional activities in the region” (Straubhaar & Duarte, 2005, p. 246). By the mid 1990s MTV realized that to succeed in local markets it needed to compete with domestic players by providing audiences with local content. MTV’s first strategy was to expand by broadcasting American acts. “The music television network seemed to believe its own marketing slogan ‘one planet – one music’” (Chalaby, 2003, p. 465). Focusing on U.S. artists did not solidify audience

attention and when local channels began broadcasting local music videos MTV audiences declined. Chalaby (2003) explained, “this prompted the network to rethink its strategy...it embarked on an expensive programme of localization” (p. 465). For example, in India, competition from Channel [V], a local music channel, provided the impetus for MTV to move to featuring more Hindi musicians. Audience preference for content that appears “local” is predicted by cultural proximity theory (la Pastina & Staubhbaar, 2005). Specifically, la Pastina and Staubhbaar (2005) argue that television audiences prefer to watch programs they perceive as culturally relevant – even when the broadcaster is a foreign network. Currently, MTV reaches 384 million households around the world and is a trendsetter for global youth pop culture.

An example of the glocalization of music can be found in South Korea. With the help of MTV, South Korea has exploded into the music industry, changing the identity and look of South Koreans. The South Korean youth oriented music is called K Pop or “gayo.” K Pop singers are known for their unique and hip style of music but are heavily influenced by the U.S. styles. Taking trends commonly associated with rap and hip-hop, such as breakdancing, and adding unique twists has resulted in a global fusion product. K Pop combines elements of U.S. music such as reggae and rap and California fashion such as surf wear, blonde hair, and baggy clothes with Korean styles to create a new genre of music.

MTV has saturated most of the Western European markets and has a strong presence throughout Asia and Latin America. Recently, MTV has paid very close attention to the PRC’s enormous market potential. An example is the deal between Viacom and Baidu, the PRC’s number one search engine. By aligning itself with Baidu, Viacom hopes to bolster the online presence of MTV (Batson, 2006). This merger will give Chinese users access to 15,000 hours of MTV, Nickelodeon original video content, and music videos licensed by five top Chinese and Asian

music companies for online viewing or downloading (Viacom press release, 2006). As a result, Internet users will have access to MTV China's locally produced shows, MTV reality shows including *Pimp My Ride* (2004-present) and *Laguna Beach* (2004-present), Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* (2000-present), and *Drake & Josh* (2004-present), as well as music videos. In addition, Nickelodeon launched a multi-billion dollar franchise of consumer products featuring SpongeBob and Dora in Asia and other markets (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2006). As these examples illustrate, Viacom's television programming is thriving in the global marketplace, even though it "had to make increasingly larger adaptations to local cultures, reflecting the theories of cultural proximity and the predominance of cultural-linguistic definition of markets" (Straubhaar & Duarte, 2005, p. 225).

For tween and teen audiences watching MTV, the excitement may be in watching something foreign. American pop-stars appeal to teenagers in a global setting and "reach ones [audiences] that are open in a cultural sense" (Jones, 2005, p. 85). MTV cleverly fits into the local culture by packaging local artists through the MTV format. The localization process has made MTV even more appealing, but nevertheless the package is inherently American and indeed a Viacom product. This is especially true in the case of teen and children's television: "American conglomerates are set to dominate the era of multichannel television because of their involvement in the international television business. They have successfully adopted local adaptation of content and programming as an international strategy, creating hybrid television brands and media products that appeal ever more to European viewers" (Chalaby, 2006, p. 36). Even in countries where domestic programming has been encouraged and even mandated by the state, private station owners and audiences continue to favor American imports.



In the case of Nickelodeon, cartoon formats are lucrative and easily exported. Olson (1999) explains, “children’s programming is in part, so readily exportable because so often language is not a barrier: The movement of animated characters’ mouths and of puppets or actors in full-head costumes does not pose any challenges to dubbing. The animals and fantasy creatures that make up a significant portion of children’s television are internationally recognizable” (p. 135). The ease of dubbing makes it simple to seamlessly localize a program in such a way that eliminates the “foreignness.” The result is that most animated television programming becomes a transparent text that appeals to an audience in any cultural context.

The economic benefit of internationalizing children’s programming is widespread. In the U.S., children’s commercial television has been clever to use cross market and multi-platform promotion (McAllister & Giglio, 2005). In many ways, international expansion is an extension of this proven strategy. Specifically, Viacom has the opportunity to make more money on a product that does not require new cost or overhead. Children’s programs typically have a long life span; as the television audience continues to age, fresh, new, and eager audience members view the programs for the first time, which amortizes the cost. In addition, children’s programs are not the only way a company can make money off their popularity. As Olson (1999) states “...from a financial standpoint, the challenge is in designing a motion picture or television show that naturally lends itself to toys, apparel, food, and other products” (p. 117). The merchandising of the licensed products that go with a television program, including movies, makes children’s media financially appealing. For example, Nickelodeon sells toys, video games and DVDs under license agreements in 22 countries and launched SpongeBob products in Japan even though the program had not yet been popular on television (Edgecliffe-Johnson 6 August 2006).

Although communication researchers lamented the exportation of U.S. media products to the rest of the world during the 1970s and 1980s, the reality is that the international television landscape has changed to include a complicated set of texts that are characterized by the intersection of global and local forces. Viacom has been localizing content since it began expanding internationally. The impetus for localization is not necessarily protecting cultural identity, but is much more pragmatic – local content works best at attracting audiences. The process of localization comes from a market desire and could be considered nothing more than a superficial covering for the U.S. values that underscore so much of what Viacom produces. Jones (2005) explains MTV's expansion by stating that “what MTV Networks did was to incorporate into its programming the imagined global thereby naturalizing discourses of struggle between the global and the local through an overlay of localization...MTV Networks was able to coopt the local imagination of its place within the global” (p. 86). Viacom has dubbed its cartoons on Nickelodeon and made Nick.com available in many languages, but dubbing does not equal localization. “While the network [MTV] adapted its playlist to local tastes and preferences, it concurrently provided a platform on which American music was linked to global television across the world” (Crothers, 2007, p. 60). The economic success of Viacom in the future is unlikely to falter; it is the consequence of exposure to this type of commercial pop culture that concerns the authors.

### *Lessons from Viacom*

While it is difficult to generalize how much time children around the world are spending watching television and using the Internet and other mass media, it is safe to assume that it is a significant part of children's lives. In the U.S., it is estimated that 2 to 6-year-old children spend on average a little more than 2 hours a day using screen media (Rideout and Hamel, 2006) and

older children and teenagers spend approximately 6 hours a day with media (Roberts, Foehr and Rideout, 2005). In Europe, children spend the most time watching television at more than 2 1/2 hours per day with their total media time averaging close to 6 hours (Beentjes, Koolstra, Mareseille, & van der Voort, 2001). Viacom has kept pace with the teenagers and children's technological choices by offering their brands through multiple platforms.

Children learn from television exposure and researchers confirm that television can teach audiences about numbers and letters, social skills, language acquisition, and even about diversity and cultural tolerance (Cortés, 2000; Truglio, Lovelace, Seguí, and Scheirner, 2001; Linebarger and Walker, 2005). It makes sense then, to believe that television programming plays a role in the formation of an ethnic identity and the underlining cultural values. In the U.S., when children and teenagers watch Viacom networks they are exposed to a value system that originates from within their own culture. When children and teenagers watch Viacom networks outside the U.S., they are exposed to a cultural identity and value system that is foreign, whether they recognize it or not. Typically the values associated with American programming are the ones that are inherently part of the culture. Crothers (2007) outlines typical values in American popular culture: "individualist values dominate both conflict and conflict resolution on popular American television" (p. 68). He further describes the preference for happy endings: "the happy ending serves to emphasize the importance of the individual in determining his or her own fate and happiness – and thereby manages to undermine the role of class, education, fate or any other factor in shaping human lives. The happy ending is, in large measure, the contemporary popular culture manifestation of the myth of the self-made man" (Crothers, 2007, p.72). What is problematic about an identity that is "learned" and "tested" with a global corporation is that that very identity is being marketed to them and is ultimately based on a bottom line which does not

see its audience as citizens of the world or individuals, but as consumers who will be loyal for life.

It is clear that children in an international context are exposed to a variety of global texts, which perpetuate a Western dominant ideology and as discussed, one part of this ideology is individualism. Individualism and collectivism are two of the most heuristic dimensions of cultural variability (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1988). The strength of this dimension lies in the “clearest individual-level equivalents in cultural level tendencies” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 56). While individualistic cultures, such as the U.S., emphasize individual goals, collectivistic cultures, such as China, stress the primacy of group goals over individual preferences. The major difference between individualism and collectivism is the reliance on and importance of the group. Collectivistic cultures rely on ingroups to look after them in exchange for the individuals’ loyalty; in individualistic cultures, individuals assume responsibility for their families and themselves. According to Tajfel (1976), ingroups are “groups of people about whose welfare one is concerned, with whom one is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from which leads to discomfort or even pain” (p. 75).

The primary interest of children’s television networks is to make money by creating ambiguous texts that can be decoded in a variety of cultural contexts. Exporting cartoons around the globe is convenient, cheap, and profitable. Dubbing is easily accessible and translation is easy when the program is animated. Most children do not have any idea that these programs were created somewhere other than their home country. This raises an important issue – what does this mean for identity formation when the texts are not culturally specific, when they are ambiguous with no cultural context, but rather have definite “Western” (or corporate) ideologies imbedded? Often, in the programs created by networks such as Nickelodeon and Viacom,

children see characters who are individualistic heroes often engaged in violent acts and sexy young girls whose appearance is valued over their ambition. In a global context, the children's networks may indeed be in part creating an identity that is not tied to any particular culture, but one that is manufactured by transnational media corporations whose commitment to children is only to ensure maximum profits. Lustyik (2007) explains “essentially, media conglomerates in general are primarily in the business of creating new niche markets, and then delivering these audiences to the advertisers who are selling not only Western goods but also Western cultural identities and values” (p. 304).

With global and mass-market appeal, children are persuaded every day to incorporate the ideology and identity of certain characters that come to life on the screen. The lived-experience of becoming Dora, or SpongeBob, or a character on *Laguna Beach* transcends identity into a form of reality, creating a small crisis for children, who are at an age when they question who they are in relation to the larger environment. Because identity is fluid, vulnerable, and creates changes, identity among global children is now becoming more ambiguous. An ambiguous identity is defined as not tied to any particular local culture, but one in which Western values such as materialism, individualism, and consumerism are privileged. This ambiguous identity is not the same worldwide. It is absolutely informed by locality so that a child in Japan may incorporate different elements than a child in India or Spain. What is common is that each child is viewing the same text, and are therefore influenced by the same global system, but incorporating this system in a way that is relevant for him or herself. It is for this reason that the new identity is ambiguous.

*Global or Local Child?*

When discussing the impact of children's television programming on identity development, it is important to note that an ambiguous identity creates a new tension: the pull between the global child and the local child. The global child is defined as a child who adopts and embraces the practices of international programming. Children who are intrigued by foreign mass media (whether they recognize it as foreign or not) are influenced by the underlying cultural messages that are preferred in Western culture. The global child is more open to receiving non-traditional information and may select the foreign product because it is different from his or her local culture. The global child may be eager to embrace a new custom and challenge the tradition of the local space. A global child is likely to eagerly watch *Dora the Explorer* and *SpongeBob Squarepants* and is ready to move to programming on MTV as he or she grows older. The preference and acceptance of the foreign programming will increase exposure and increase the influence of the values presented in the texts (Elsmar, 2003).

On the other hand, the local child is made up of the cultural values, practices, and traditions of the ethnic orientated group. This local child still retains the language of the ingroup and perhaps has pressure to conform to its standards as well. Comstock (1993) argues that the "components of identity reflect and result from social interactions with family, friends, peers, authorities, and others as well as from mass media images and values. Indeed, since the mass media influence how people treat one another, as clusters of demographic and cultural characteristics, social interactions are in part informed by the shared understandings or stereotypes about people that the media provide" (p. 311). Given the preference for traditional culture, the local child will be more likely to reject the choices presented by Viacom and opt for locally produced programming or programming that has undergone significant localization similar to the co-production process

promoted by Sesame Workshop (Moran, 2006). Children, however, may feel torn between a global and local identity, which in turn may result in the creation of an ambiguous identity that is not tied to their local culture.

The contradictory nature between the global and local child exists and operates for the simple reason that identity is very contextual and situational, which has clear implications for the study of communication and for advancing audience research regarding the impact of international television. First of all, social identity theory indicates that the stronger an individual identifies with his or her group, the more bias he or she will show in favor of those groups (Brewer, 1979). But what group does a child belong to? And during which situational context? The pressure to conform to television standards and global marketing is prevalent among children around the world. Children may perceive the internal ethnic group as the “outgroup” and have no desire to be a part of this collective group. The general categories of local groups, however, are highly contextual, as collective group identity no longer implies ethnicity. Ethnic children who are viewed as “other” may adopt the identity of the show they are watching.

Second, understanding the contextual cues will have an important implication for children’s communication research. For example, behavioral cues are clear indications of being perceived as an outgroup member within the ethnic group. Intercultural communication research is concerned with the process of encoding and decoding data when strangers interact with each other. Although the intercultural stranger implies a stranger within the ethnic group, there is little research evidence regarding intergroup behavior within the ethnic group or the importance of the behavioral cues associated with outgroup perception during interaction. If children can and do account for feeling like outgroup members, several important questions arise, such as how do children negotiate their local identity or global identity when interacting with members of that

particular ethnic group? Thus, understanding the complexity of ethnic identity as it is shaped and molded by groups and societal influences constitutes a major challenge for communication researchers.

As international corporations such as Viacom, Inc. continue to expand and look for global audiences with ambiguous “glocal” texts, distinctions between the media experiences for a Chinese child and one in North America will gradually be eliminated. As children and teenagers develop a sense of self in this increasingly complex global environment, they must negotiate their identity formation in ways that make sense to them. It is the authenticity of their identity that is in question as they interact with media products created to earn a profit rather than engaging in culturally specific storytelling. As globalization continues to redefine a sense of place, the ambiguous identity formed somewhere between the local and global may be the place that we find ourselves.



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