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The Representational Intertwinement of Gender, Age and Uses of Information and Communication Technology: A Comparison Between German and French Preteen Magazines

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The media creates a space upon which “social identities” (Goffman 1975: 12) and their assigned categorical attributes (gender, age, social class, etc.) are put on display for the public (Quéré 1992, Charaudeau 1997, Voirol 2005, and Ollivier 2009). Moreover, insofar as it acts as a ‘signifying agent’ (Hall 2007: 91) within ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1996), the media participates in the production and circulation of meanings about these identities that thereby become stereotypes. The notion of the stereotype refers to the problematics of the specification and differentiation of social groups (Amossy and Herschberg-Pierrot 1997: 45). Our use of it here is close to that of Henri Boyer’s conceptualisation of ‘representation’ (2008). For us, a stereotype results from a process of identification and categorisation that is carried out upon a group sharing certain categorical attributes. This sociodiscursive process aims to characterise the group as having certain behaviours and practices, and the result is not necessarily static, nor must it always be framed as caricature. Indeed, we refer to extremely exaggerated and simplified stereotypes as ‘hyperbolic stereotypes’.

In this sense, the media develops and establishes normative representations of femininity and masculinity, and may be defined as ‘technologies of gender’ (de Lauretis 2007: 75). It thus contributes to the construction of ‘hegemonic’ representations and stereotypes (Hall op. cit.) that are not entirely stable, being subject to processes of resignification, evolution, rupture, opposition and counter-representation.

As such, the subjects of gender, preadolescence, and ICT use are all objects of discourse that are constructed by written and/or visual mediums – sometimes in contradictory fashion – but that are not fixed yet in the field of media and communications. Here, we seek to examine their representational intertwinement, and to cross-analyse imagery of gender, age, and ICT use. We examine whether the imagery in preteen magazines ‘marks’ (Brekhus 2005) the use and operation of ICT by gender and age (and vice versa). Specifically, we are focused on the representation of the uses of new technologies in German and French preteen magazines over the last thirty years. We attempt to identify common representational trends and discontinuities in both countries during this period. Were certain technologies and modes of use associated with particular genders? How did

media representations participate in the mutual shaping of gender, technology, and age group? In each country, to what extent did imagery of uses of the computer or video games contribute to creating a model of a specific age group that had not existed just a few decades earlier, namely that of the ‘preadolescents’ or ‘preteens’?

In the following pages, we attempt to answer these questions by drawing on the results of an exploratory research on ICT imagery in French and German preteen magazines. Our comparative study focuses on a corpus of images published since 1983 in three German magazines, *Micky Maus*, *Geolino* and *Zeit Leo*, and two French magazines, *Le Journal de Mickey* and *Okapi*. These magazines rely heavily on illustrations, and we identified and collected all the images featuring ICT, including the Internet and multimedia (computer, tablet), telecommunications (telephone, fax, Minitel), audio (microphone, radio, transistor, Walkman), and still or moving image capture (still camera, video camera, film, video games, television). We thus gathered a heterogeneous body of images: photos, drawings, cartoons and computer graphics.

Whether they were used as advertisements or as illustrations supplementing editorial content (the various sections and articles), the photographs presented in these magazines and in our corpus showcase scenes of ICT being used in scripted manners with children posed as the users of it. They were not taken in a natural context showing real ~~genuine~~ actions, and therefore do not capture spontaneous uses of technology in action. To use Ervin Goffman’s terminology (1979), these photographs represent ‘hyperritualised’ scenes depicting social types rather than specific individuals. The hyperritualised aspect appears still more accentuated in the drawings gathered, including some inspired by comic strips, which show a gendered use of ICT by preteens, often with undertones of caricature.

In total, this quantitative and qualitative analysis includes a set of 680 images, 413 from French magazines and 267 from German journals. The corpus is uniform in terms of the age of its intended audience (9-13). However, it is not chronologically homogeneous, leaving gaps because academic and public libraries do not automatically archive media that is produced for young people. As a result, we were only able to obtain partial collections from individuals. In France, we gathered images from issues of *Le Journal de Mickey* dating from 2000 to 2014, and issues of *Okapi* dating from 1983 to 2014. In Germany, the images collected are from issues of *Micky Maus* dating 1990 to 2011, issues of *Geolino* dating 2011-2014, and issues of *Zeit Leo* dating 2011 to 2014.

Preadolescence, a Nebulous but Gendered and Technologised Age

The emergence of preadolescence as a transition age between the end of childhood and the beginning of puberty is a relatively recent phenomenon. While the term ‘pre-pubescent’ circulated in Europe’s medical community from the beginning of the twentieth century, it was not until the 1940s in the United States that the commercial sectors of fashion and cosmetics began to identify a new social group – girls at the threshold of adolescence – and to shape it into a market segment to which it could offer ‘intermediate’ lines of merchandise (Cook and Kaiser 2004). Beginning in the late 1980s, U.S. marketers became increasingly focused on children on the cusp of adolescence,

recognising their growing purchasing power and specific consumer behaviours. In the 1990s, in the U.S. and later in Europe, preadolescence became a 'target' to 'capture' (Cochoy 2004) for a panoply of brands and products: clothing, accessories, body care, cultural activities (Ottobry 2004), media content (Pasquier 1999, Monnot 2009), and new digital technologies.

By the late 1990s, this result of social categories created by marketers drew the attention of sociologists and anthropologists studying childhood, culture and consumption. Dick Hebdige (1988) found that in the social imaginary and commercial world alike, the figure of the teenager was fading into a youth of an ever-lowering age. But this new transitional period was surrounded by semantic murk, as the normativity of market segmentation paradoxically produced an unclear, nebulous result. Nicoletta Diasio and Virginie Vinel, views preadolescence as an "age of diversity": "calendar age, biological age, social age, and school class do not correspond" (Diasio and Vinel 2014: 12). As suggested by the neologism 'tween', the name North American marketers have attributed to this group, these preadolescents are situated *in be-tween*, at an uncertain intermediate point. To define preadolescence according to biological age is therefore less than straightforward, as the boundaries fluctuate from one advertiser to another, being delimited variously at ages eight to twelve, eight to fourteen, or eleven to twelve.

Preadolescence thus seems to be characterised by instability, and market and media discourse find themselves modelling and normalizing a nebulous and elusive age (De Julio 2014). Figuratively speaking, this work of representation follows an iconographic tradition constructed over the last two centuries that represents puberty's biological metamorphosis as the body's inscription into a gender. In line with ancient physiognomic tradition, growing up is optically accompanied by the acquisition of gendered traits and an increasingly significant cleavage between the masculine and the feminine.

In recent years, academic and professional literature in the field of marketing and communication has frequently visualised the current generation of children on the border of adolescence as one of early adopters who are experienced and passionate about digital technologies (computers, mobile phones and smartphones, tablets, e-books, MP3 players, etc.) to which they are supposedly accustomed from birth, as suggested by the labels attributed to them like 'digital natives' or 'Net Generation'. Unlike their 'digital immigrant' adult counterparts, who were born into a world where digital technology did not yet exist, today's preteens should belong to a generation of so-called digital natives, who allegedly don't need to familiarise themselves with new technologies that come to them 'naturally' from the cradle onward (Prensky 2001, Palfrey Gasser 2008). Marketing thus apprehends age as the determining factor in the ICT use, and some authors even distinguish a 'Computer Generation', that is born between 1975 and 1987 and that is composed of 'native speakers' of the computer language, from an 'Internet Generation', that is born from 1988 onwards (Block Schutz 2009) and that is perfectly integrated and at ease in digital network environments.

Sociologists studying ICT use, for their part, have no shortage of questions regarding the limits and even the dangers of these classifications and their normativity, as well as the 'effect of erasure on other social divisions that create fissures in these generational

constructions' (Lobet-Maris 2011: 22). Media studies also advise caution and urge us not to forget about the fragmentation of social and cultural identities present in among ICT users: '[t]alk of digital natives may make it harder for us to pay attention to the digital divide in terms of who has access to different technical platforms and the participation gap in terms of who has access to certain skills and competencies or for that matter, certain cultural experiences and social identities' (Jenkins 2007). Meticulous observation of the everyday practices of young people helps to abandon the caricature of the preteen digital native. It can also highlight the specific ways in which ICT participates in the experience and construction of gender and identity, something that appears to increasingly escape adult control and to be more and more organised by the marketing and media world (Pasquier 2005).

As we will show later in the remaining of this chapter, preteen magazines offer particularly rich material for studying advertising and media representations of the mix between age, gender, and ICT uses and appropriation, as well as for examining the identity profile of preadolescence generated in Germany and in France over the last three decades.

Stronger Diversity in France, Counter-Representations in Germany

In German preteen magazines, images of analogue and digital technological devices primarily appear in advertising. Until the end of the 1990s, in the pages of *Micky Maus*, video-game consoles, computers, cameras, toy phones, and other technological objects were placed at the centre stage in ads boasting their performance with fact-based arguments citing ease of use, portability, and variety of functions. It was not until the 2000s that the magazine's advertising images began to feature the users of these devices. The new images were almost exclusively of boys showing and/or using a technical device and making claims about it to the young readers. Girls were absent in most advertisements. When they were included, they often appeared younger and smaller than the boys, and were never placed at centre but rather were relegated to the sides or background, from where they attentively or admiringly observed the centrally featured male characters using the device. Beginning around 2010, German advertising imagery started moving towards a representation linking technological devices and uses with imaginary worlds: for example, one Nintendo Gameboy advertisement depict boys on a bus playing with their consoles, out of which Pokemon figures magically emerge. The mediums of photography and comic strips merge, and the technological device becomes a tool activating the imagination and allowing young users to connect with one another, as well as to the fantastical universe produced by the cultural industry of childhood.

Unlike the German corpus, in which ICTs appear mainly in advertisements, French magazines also feature it in their editorial content, which is frequently laid out and illustrated in the format of newspaper cartoons or comic strips. The images' discourse is not necessarily centred on technology, but on the environment into which technology is placed, such as urban public spaces (streets, parks); a family home, including the living room, kitchen or bedroom; school (classrooms, playgrounds); work (businesses); cultural venues (libraries, concert and theatre halls); and social centres (cafes). These environments serve, first, to construct a 'model' of the family structure centred on the heterosexual 'white' couple (Dyer, 1997) and their two children (often a boy and a girl),

and second, to link gender with social roles – and consequently to ICT use. As an example, *Le Journal de Mickey* regularly depicts a father figure in the living room watching television while the mother works in the kitchen.

In addition to the characters' division of labour by gender and age reflecting power relations, representations of social identities are often relatively static. Indeed, the French corpus shows very little diversity in its construction of preadolescence (and even in its treatment of adults) that might 'trouble' the norms of femininity and masculinity (Butler, 1990) as they are reiterated over the course of the images. Characters are systematically gendered and endowed with an age so that their depictions enable readers to differentiate between boys and girls, men and women, and fathers and mothers. The visual markers of gender and age are embodied in hairstyle, clothing (its shape, colour and pattern), and accessories (including ICTs). Feminine characters have long hair (varying according to the age being portrayed), wear skirts and jewellery, barrettes or scrunchies, and their clothes/accessories have patterns (flowers, hearts) and/or colours (pink, purple) associated with femininity. Masculine characters have short hair (with long hair sometimes used to mark adolescence), and wear pants, t-shirts or button-down shirts. This grammar of representation, which is linked to the importance of drawing in the French corpus, catalyses a typification of the characters by gender.

These trends are more nuanced in the German corpus. In the photos of advertisements in *Micky Maus*, the ICT user-type is a muscular, smiling boy who is confident, dominant, competitive, a winner. But the masculinities featured in German media's staged imagery cannot be reduced to a reproduction of heterosexist norms of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2014). Indeed, other images are shown: boys displaying a wider range of emotions, or transgressing the ideal of the strong, athletic body, or aestheticizing and caring for their bodies differently. In the rare advertisements where they are associated with ICT, girls appear calm, thoughtful and open. Their smallness and fragility contrasts sharply with the strength of the autonomous, adventurous, agile and aggressive heroines that populate the video games advertised in the magazine.

Even if the German corpus accounts for more qualitatively varied femininities and masculinities, girls are quantitatively fewer than in the French corpus. Indeed, in *Okapi*, *Le Journal de Mickey* and *Micky Maus* alike, boys are over-represented even as the magazines cater to a mixed audience. A count of the number of male and female characters, and the number of times they are shown as ICT users, indicates a strong gender differential. In total, 71% of the characters in images found in the German *Micky Maus* are marked by the male gender, while images in France's *Le Journal de Mickey* are 68% male; in *Okapi* they are 61% male. The difference is rendered even more striking when considering the number of women represented in the images who use technology: a mere 15% in *Micky Maus* and 24% in *Le Journal de Mickey*. *Okapi* shows more balance, with 43% of its depictions of technology users marked by the female gender. However, this (quasi) parity in ICT use is relatively recent, as girls were almost non-existent in the 1980s – making up only 11% of characters and 7% of users, while from 2010 to 2014, 42% of characters and 48% of users were marked by the female gender. This relative balance beginning in the 2010s correlates more to the magazine's editorial policy than to the national context, since if you compare it to *Le Journal de Mickey*, only 35% of the

latter's were female characters from 2010 to 2014, and these characters represented only 23% of technology users. It should be added that various public debates contributed to this development, like the discussion on gender equality [*parité*] in the late 1990s and on diversity in 2005. Differences also exist between magazines in how they stage ICTs, even if these may somewhat reflect national specificities.

Gendered Representations of ICT Use

The German and French corpuses have commonalities and differences in their representations of technology use. Whether in the French or German preteen magazines, ICT was primarily associated with masculinity in the 1980s. Its use was feminised beginning in the 1990s with the image of the computer. However, the technology was mostly represented in a masculine context during the 1980s and 1990s, being shown accompanied by young boys who were often alone, using it to play video games or to explore its technical aspects. This imagery participated in the construction of the male figure of the computer 'geek'.

Beginning in the 2000s, the computer took hold visually in different worlds (school, home, work) and was shown in association with both genders. In 2010, it became the most widely represented technology in the French corpus, overtaking television. In the images, girls and boys used the family computer without distinction, but their uses differed. The former were shown using their keyboard to develop and maintain social skills and relationships with others, whether romantic or friendly, which was not the case for boys. Adolescent girls were regularly shown drafting an email or communicating over social networks like Facebook or Twitter.

The association between femininity and relationships with others was also present in telephone use (landline and mobile), in both the German and French corpus. Adolescent girls were shown calling their girlfriends to socialise or chat since they are supposedly 'talkative'. In *Okapi* and *Le Journal de Mickey*, illustrations and photographs from the 1980s and 1990s show adolescent girls with a telephone to their ear, smiling and/or with their mouth open, sometimes lying on a bed; in the 2000s, they were portrayed exchanging romantic or friendly texts in their bedrooms or the schoolyard. This type of staging is also found in the German corpus where for adolescent girls, the phone is associated with having contact with others as well as with feelings or romantic relationships. But a few counter-examples exist, like one advertising image featuring a girl in boy's clothes, rollerblading with two other boys during a school holiday, with the mobile phone portrayed as the guarantor of her independence and security. In contrast to girls, preteen boys in the French corpus use the phone to perform an action (calling for a service, subscribing to a magazine, calling the police), and the words they exchange are often specified in bubbles (which is never the case for girls). In advertisements, masculinity may also be linked with the laptop's technological aspect and its (complex) manufacturing process. In the German *Micky Maus*, meanwhile, the mobile phone often appears in advertising discourse because it helps construct the figure of the cool boy who is admired by girls.

One of the peculiarities of the French corpus is that in addition to linking girls' use of certain technologies to relationships with others, girls are depicted as having cultural practices that often mirror those of television, which on the scale of 'cultural legitimacy' (Bourdieu 1979, Lahire 2004) are more depreciated than those of boys. For example, in the 2000s, microphones and amplifiers had an increased presence of images, reflecting the development of amateur musical practices. But while boys were shown practicing rock or hip-hop, musical genres legitimised in the 1990s, adolescent girls were shown within the world of popular television music. In the 2010s, for example, they were regularly depicted singing songs from the musical television series *Violetta*. Occasionally, they appeared in images of teenage rock bands, but they were always in the minority, averaging three boys to one girl, and with some images of bands featuring no girls at all.

The demonstration of socially hierarchical gendered cultural practices is also apparent in images featuring the television. In both *Okapi* and *Le Journal de Mickey*, masculine uses are linked to major sporting events on one hand – like the Olympics and the World Cup – which boys and/or their fathers watch from the living room sofa; and to societally valued practices like watching the news on the other hand. Adolescent girls and their mothers, for their part, are almost systematically shown having a devalued use of television: whatever the age, they are represented watching television shows 'for girls' (Biscarrat, 2015) that are populist and/or sentimental, like *Hélène et les Garçons [Hélène and boys]*, *Plus Belle la Vie [More beautiful life]*, or *Lizzie McGuire*. In *Le Journal de Mickey*, the use of television is strongly associated with masculinity, and signifies a (very) asymmetrical construction of gender relations: the mother is nearly always associated with domestic and double day work (ironing, cooking...) – and therefore not TV watching – while the father sits on the couch watching television to relax, sometimes accompanied by his children. This pitfall is not visible in *Okapi* or in the German magazines.

Apart from gender-differentiated use of ICT, other technologies are also presented as masculine-only, like video games and digital media players, even though teenage girls increasingly use them since the 2010s. Whether in France or Germany, images depicting video games usually show male preteens, joystick in hand, playing together. When girls are visible, they are often outnumbered. And when they are shown alone in the French corpus, it is because they are playing games related to 'care work' – a domain traditionally associated with femininity (Molinier 2010: 161-162), like games about the protection of the planet. The German corpus includes ads in which girls are presented as the marketing target for video games with a significant affective dimension (like pet care), or which connect to practices that are conventionally regarded as feminine (such as dance). But in the German corpus, girls can also be seen playing 'serious' video games whose main purpose is learning.

Even if it has been feminised in recent years, the portable music player (cassette, CD or MP3) is a technology associated with masculinity. It is characteristically used as a visual marker of preadolescence: the headphone, shown over the ears or around the neck of boys, tends to be an accessory in the grammar of preteen representation.

This description of the logics of the representation of ICT (the most visible among the corpus) indicates a process of stereotypification. The demonstration of their uses contributes to characterising and differentiating preteen boys from preteen girls. Certainly this process is not static; it evolves over time and reflects differences between magazines and countries. Nevertheless, we may observe that France is more normative than Germany, where femininities and masculinities can be troubled.

Conclusion

The imagery of preteen magazines for readers ages nine to thirteen has contributed in recent decades to shaping, developing and recirculating visual stereotypes of preteens and ICTs. These stereotypes appear highly polarised in terms of gender, and analysing the corpus reveals a markedly different treatment of boys versus girls vis-à-vis ICT use. The emergence of different models in the German corpus, however, seems to confirm the hypothesis that ‘far from escaping the traditional conception of differences of the sexes, which tends to reduce gender to a binary opposition between the masculine and the feminine, [the media] is also a site of discourse and counter-discourse and counter-models, which displace, rework, and reconfigure the dominant conception’ (Julliard and Quemener 2014). On one hand, certain stereotypical traits and behaviours are associated with a staged imagery intersecting age, masculinities and femininities, and the use of ICTs; on the other hand, these hegemonic representations are part and parcel of dissident versions and counter-examples with which the readership of German preteen magazines, or part of it, is also supposed to identify.

Media and advertising imagery of the insertion of ICT into everyday life does not, then, erase gender differences. Nevertheless, the materiality and functionality of the technical devices populating the pages of German and French preteen magazines also interweave with social norms, values, symbols and cultural traits that appear highly gendered. Even the diverse uses of technology that have become ordinary, like the telephone, television, mobile phone and computer, are accompanied by differences in what are supposed to be the interests and practices of girls versus those of boys. The comparison also shows that although they are strongly anchored to the dominant models of masculinity and femininity, gendered representations of ICT are culturally and historically situated and subject to change.

The results of this work therefore confirm the pursuit of advertisers to turn digital devices into identity objects for preteen culture (Octobre 2010), so that in these stereotyped images, headphones, MP3 players, and video game consoles become visual markers of childhood at the border of adolescence. The analysis of our corpus, however, invites us to question the thesis of a spontaneous or ‘natural’ adherence by the younger generation to new technical devices that they intuitively and effortlessly know how to use. Over the past few decades, French and German preteen magazines have sought to bring digital technology into the world of preteen objects, everyday practices, knowledge and values. Editorial content and advertising discourse within the analysed magazines has aimed at teaching its youngest readers how to operate CD-ROMs, or leading them to discover the mobile phone, computer, and Internet. Meanwhile, preteen magazines have contributed to creating a very complex network of relationships between the form and content of the

various media forms involved in the emergence of a transmedia culture. In this way, the images in these magazines reveal their ambition to act as mediators between young readers and a technological world that is still opaque and unfamiliar.

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