

'Glocalizing' Media Products

Investigating the Cultural Shareability of the 'Karate Kids' Entertainment-Education Film in Thailand

The article investigates the cultural shareability of the Karate Kids entertainment-education film in Thailand. This cartoon film was consciously designed to promote HIV/AIDS prevention and control behaviours among street children living in various countries on various continents. The film was shown to Thai street children. Focus group discussions were conducted to assess whether or not the characters, themes, plot, and the setting of the film were culturally appropriate in the context of Thailand. The results of the study indicate that an entertainment-education product has the potential to be effective in diverse cultural contexts, especially when the target audiences share common socio-demographic characteristics (as street children do all over the world).

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Given their ability to attract large audiences, popular entertainment media genres like soap operas, rock music, and cartoons usually represent a big attraction for commercial media interests. In more recent years, such popular entertainment media genres are increasingly being viewed in some countries as purveyors of social change. Since the mid-1970s, in several countries, entertainment media programmes have effectively disseminated educational messages on such topics as adult literacy, family planning, sexual responsibility, gender equality, and national integration (Kincaid, Rimon, Piotrow, & Coleman, 1992; Nariman, 1993; Singhal & Rogers, 1989; Windahl, Signitzer, & Olson, 1992; Singhal & Brown, 1996; Rogers et. al, 1997; Singhal & Udompim, 1997). Such terms as 'entertainment-education,' 'enter-educate,' 'infotainment,' and 'edutainment' have been used to describe media programmes that consciously incorporate educational content in popular entertainment genres in order to serve social and development goals (Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993).

Entertainment-education programmes capitalize on the various unique advantages offered by entertainment programming genres in conveying prosocial messages to the public. Entertainment genres are: (1) *popular*, as

everyone likes to be entertained; (2) *pervasive*, as they reach people everywhere; (3) *personal*, as media characters share their intimate emotions, feelings, and thoughts with members of the audience; (4) *persuasive*, as they influence peoples' attitudes and behaviours; (5) *passionate*, as they stimulate audience passions and emotions; (6) *practical*, as they are feasible to produce and distribute; and (7) *profitable*, as they attract commercial advertising support (Piotrow, 1990; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). These unique characteristics of popular entertainment genres make the entertainment-education strategy a potentially effective mass media strategy to foster social change. Among media programming genres, these entertainment genres have an unusual ability to balance commercial and social interests.

Utilizing entertainment formats to educate the audiences regarding prosocial development topics is not a new concept. Thousands of years ago, even before the creation of written language, oral storytelling, folk music, and drama, were used to discuss and promote moral and social values in society (Rogers & Shefner, 1994; Singhal & Brown, 1996; Valbuena, 1988). However, the strategic and purposive incorporation of educational messages into popular media entertainment genres is a relatively new concept (Singhal & Brown, 1996). One of the earliest uses of the entertainment-education strategy in mass communication can be traced back to 1951 when a BBC radio soap opera, 'The Archers', was consciously designed to promote agricultural innovations in Britain (Singhal & Brown, 1996). In television, the entertainment-education

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strategy was utilized by Miguel Sabido, a writer-producer-director in Mexico, who produced eleven *telenovelas* (or soap operas) between the 1967–1982 to promote various educational-development themes (Nariman, 1993). In more recent years, the Center for Communication Programs at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA, has designed radio soap operas, music videos, television spots, street theater, comic books and other popular media genres to promote family planning and public health behaviour in several dozen developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Piotrow, 1990; Church & Geller, 1989).

The entertainment-education genre represents an alternative to existing media entertainment genres that primarily rely on overt depictions of sex and violence to capture audiences. Research evaluations of the effects of entertainment-education programmes in various countries suggest that this genre can, under certain conditions, influence audience attitudes and behaviours in a socially-desirable direction (Nariman, 1993; Church & Geller, 1989).

This article investigates the cultural shareability of an entertainment-education cartoon film, 'Karate Kids', which was designed to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS among street children worldwide. The authors specifically investigate the cultural shareability of this film among the street children of Thailand, focusing on the appropriateness of its characters, themes, plot, and setting.

Cultural Shareability of Media Programmes

Cultural shareability of a media programme is the extent to which a programme can appeal to audiences of different cultures. A global popular culture is emerging in which people from different cultures consume the same popular entertainment media programmes (McQuail, 1994). In several countries, media practitioners have produced entertainment-education programmes that promote literacy, gender equality, and HIV/AIDS prevention in diverse socio-cultural contexts (Singhal & Udornpim, 1997; Svenkerud, Rahooi, & Singhal, 1995; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). Production of such culturally-shareable entertainment-education programmes (or 'glocal' media products) can address common social and development problems of diverse countries, substantially reducing the duplication of production efforts and costs. Such culturally-shareable programmes are especially beneficial for developing countries that lack the advanced media technology or resources to deal with pressing social problems (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). However, such programmes may not be completely shareable across all diverse audience groups (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994). A number of factors can influence the level of cultural shareability of entertainment-education media products including audiences' selective interpretations, their verbal and nonverbal signs, language, ideology, religion, culture, etc. (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994; Straubhaar, 1993).

In the past decade, several notable examples of

culturally-shareable entertainment-education programmes have been documented (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994; Singhal & Udornpim, 1997). For example, Johns Hopkins Universities Population Communication Services launched two highly popular rock music videos in over a dozen countries of Latin America to promote sexual responsibility among young adults (Church & Geller, 1989). Also since the mid-1980s, Zimbabwe based filmmaker, John Riber, has produced several film dealing with teenage pregnancy, with HIV/AIDS prevention, women's rights, etc. that has been highly popular with audiences in several dozen African countries (Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).

The 22 minute 'Karate Kids' cartoon film was consciously designed to be a culturally-shareable entertainment-education media product. Its primary intention is to promote HIV/AIDS prevention and control messages among street children all over the world. As past research does not shed much light on the cultural shareability aspects of entertainment-education programming, the present study aims to investigate the perceptions and reactions of Thai street children with respect to the 'Karate Kids' cartoon film. The results could lead to a better understanding of the potential for using entertainment-education media products across cultures.

Our study was thus mainly guided by the following research question:

To what extent did the Thai street children find the characters, themes, plot and settings of the "Karate Kids" AIDS film to be culturally appropriate?

Method

Several focus group discussions were conducted to gauge the cultural shareability of the 'Karate Kids' entertainment-education film among street children in Thailand. Before describing the nature and scope of these focus group interviews, we present the background and story of the 'Karate Kids' film.

The Focus Group Stimulus: 'Karate Kids' Film

The selected 22-minute cartoon film, 'Karate Kids,' was intentionally created to reduce high-risk HIV/AIDS behaviours among street children of various culturally-diverse countries. It was produced in the form of a videotape by Street Kids International, a non-governmental organization based in Toronto, Canada, in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada and the World Health Organization (Street Kids International, 1992). The animated film represented the major media material in a campaign package prepared by Street Kids International to promote safe HIV/AIDS behaviours among street children of various countries. To date, it has been dubbed in 25 languages, including Thai, and has been shown to street children in more than 100 countries of the world.

The production of 'Karate Kids' was based on an extensive review of the literature on media effects on children, children's preferences with respect to animation

characters, and elements of storytelling. Extensive formative research was conducted in designing the film, and the film was pretested in five cities located in five different countries on four continents: Nairobi, Kenya; Colombo, Sri Lanka; Manila, the Philippines; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and New York City, USA (Lowry & Connolly, 1991). The main character, Karate, was based on the popular street children's hero in the films 'Karate Kid' and 'Rambo' (Lowry, 1993).

The Story of 'Karate Kids'

The five principal characters in the 'Karate Kids' AIDS film are Karate, the bad guy with a smiling face, Mario, Petro, and Roza. Karate represents a positive role model for the HIV/AIDS prevention behaviours and protects himself and his friends from danger. The smiling-face man represents a negative role model for HIV/AIDS prevention; he seduces street children by doling out material rewards in exchange for sex. Mario and Petro are ordinary street children who struggle to make ends meet. Mario is punished in the film in that he dies from AIDS. Petro is rewarded; he becomes the new Karate Kid on the block.

In the story, Karate and his friends are shown living in an old building near the city market. They go to the market everyday. Some street children try to make money by polishing shoes and doing odd tasks while others come to the market just to play. At night, all these street children return to the old squatter building and stay the night with Karate and Roza, Karate's girlfriend. Petro, a small boy, earns money by showing off his juggling skills. Mario, Petro's close friend, sometimes obtains money by stealing from tourists. Karate, the group leader, keeps the street children away from danger, including protecting them from police and strangers.

Karate trains Petro and Mario to juggle in a new way, hoping that they will earn even more money with their new show. When Petro and Mario perform their new juggling routine, they earn a lot of money. However, a big boy takes their money. While Mario and Petro are upset about the cash they lost, the bad guy with a smiling face comes to them and offers them a new watch if they get into his car. Fortunately, Karate, seeing danger in the situation, shuts the car door before the boys could get in. Mario is angry with Karate's action, and asks for an explanation. Karate then explains that the smiling-faced-guy has AIDS, and since he wanted to have sex with them, he would have exposed the children to the HIV/AIDS virus. Karate then explains to the street children what HIV/AIDS is and how it is transmitted. Mario argues that it is *not* possible for him to get HIV/AIDS.

Later, the smiling-faced bad guy comes back to the market and offers children money to get into his car. Mario gets into the car ignoring the admonitions of Petro, who tries to stop him. Failing in his efforts, Petro runs to Karate to tell him what happened. They try to chase the car of the smiling-faced bad guy. When they almost catch up, they see Mario being kicked out of the car. However, the car meets with an accident and kills the bad guy.

Time passes and the children eventually grow up.

Petro and Mario earn a lot of money from their juggling performances. They spend most of their money on food and share the rest with other street children. One day, Mario falls sick. The symptoms begin to worsen with time. When Karate tells the other street children that Mario has AIDS, many children want Mario to leave the building. Karate refuses to do so and tells the children how HIV/AIDS spreads from one person to another and how they can take care of Mario with compassion without endangering themselves. One day, as Karate and Roza are explaining to other street children how to protect themselves from AIDS, Mario passes away.

After a period of sadness, Petro meets a girl named Maria. They both form a juggling team. One day, Petro sees another smiling-faced bad guy in a car offering money to street children. Remembering what happened to his friend Mario, Petro kicks the car door shut. The underlying message is that street children need to be protected from bad people and HIV/AIDS.

The Focus Group Participants: Street Children in Bangkok

Street children in Thailand are especially at the high-risk for contracting HIV/AIDS, a disease that has infected an estimated 15 out of every 1,000 people in Thailand. Street children are very hard to reach with conventional communication channels. In order to survive, many street children in Thailand are either forced or are willing to have sex with strangers in exchange for money. Many street children have multiple sex partners (Moonchinda, 1995). Educating street children about HIV/AIDS is a difficult task as they do not belong to any family or school system through which one could reach them with information on HIV/AIDS prevention. Some NGOs in Thailand attempt to educate street children about several topics including AIDS. However, the teachers face severe challenges: Sex is a taboo topic in Thai society and they can approach only a limited number of street children at a time.

Focus Group Discussions

Some 37 street children in the city of Bangkok in Thailand participated in five focus group discussions, each of seven to eight participants. These included 9 female and 28 male street children, ranging in age from nine to 18 years. In each session, participants watched the 'Karate Kids' film and discussed their perceptions of the film, its plot, its characters, its educational themes, and its setting.

In order to reach street children in Bangkok, a field staff of seven researchers contacted opinion leaders, guardians, and teachers of street children, explaining the research procedures, the amount of time needed to complete the study, and the educational benefits of their participation. The researchers were Thai graduate students specializing in social work. The researchers (a team of seven people) then went to shelters and various locations on numerous occasions to meet with street children. The purpose was to ensure that street children felt comfortable

talking with the researchers. Written permission was obtained to interview the street children. The researchers selected five locations in Bangkok and its suburbs as sites for the focus group discussions. The criteria used in selecting locations included the number of street children present at the location; the degree of comfort the street children derived in being interviewed in these locations; the availability of necessary research facilities in the locations, especially electrical outlets so that a TV monitor and a VCR could be set up; and the cooperation of the local personnel in the location. Before the focus group discussions, the researchers and the moderators (who had previous experience in conducting focus groups) informally discussed the *modus operandi*, to make sure that the respondents had a common understanding of what a focus group discussion was. The focus group discussions were conducted in the Thai language. A list of guiding questions and aided-recall materials were prepared. After the participants were exposed to the film in a group setting, they were asked a number of questions. These questions included the cultural appropriateness of using this film among street children in Thailand, their understanding and interpretation of educational messages, their perception of the relevance of the cartoon film and its characters to their lives, and the problems and benefits of using the film for promoting sound public health practices among the street children.

Cultural Shareability of 'Karate Kids' in Thailand

In our focus groups, street children reported that they had previously been exposed to some form of cartoon material, but not 'the Karate Kids' AIDS film. Most of the street children had previously heard about HIV/AIDS.

Our research question had asked: *To what extent did the Thai street children find the characters, themes, plot and settings of the 'Karate Kids' AIDS film to be culturally appropriate?* The street children in our focus group discussions felt that 'Karate Kids' cartoon film was generally appropriate for street children in the Thai socio-cultural context. The cartoon presentation was especially viewed by them as an appropriate medium for delivering messages about HIV/AIDS. They said that cartoons can express messages about HIV/AIDS, AIDS patients, and HIV/AIDS prevention methods in a less threatening way than other formats such as documentaries, television programmes, or books. The cartoon film was found to be attractive and humorous by the street children. They said it created and held their attention. They highlighted that street children usually have a very limited attention span; The cartoon served as an 'attention-grabber'.

Overall, the focus group respondents said that the cartoon film increased their knowledge about HIV/AIDS prevention and control practices and they were now more favourably inclined to practice safe-sex behaviours and be compassionate toward those who had contracted HIV/AIDS. Respondents reported a number of parallels between the context of street children depicted in the cartoon film and their own socio-cultural context. This

helped to build and maintain a sense of socio-cultural proximity between the viewers and the film. This proximity manifested itself in the voices of the characters (dubbed in Thai), the common culture of street children, the themes, and the plot.

Respondents reported that the voices of the characters in 'Karate Kids' helped gain their attention. Most of the respondents easily recognized the Thai narrator Na Toi's voice, who for many years has provided voice-overs for several popular Thai cartoons. Some reported that his voice made them feel comfortable.

Street children in our focus groups found several characteristics of the cartoon characters to be comparable with them. Respondents stated that the life of the film's cartoon characters were not very different from those of the street children in Thailand, especially in terms of the way they dressed, the kinds of problems they faced, the way they earned their livelihood money, and the way they shared food with each other. However, they said the street children in the film spoke somewhat differently than Thai street children, who typically use slang and crack dirty jokes. They added that it was appropriate for the cartoon characters not to use slang or dirty words since the film's message was relevant to the general public.

The focus group respondents also pointed out several differences between what the film depicted and their own lived experience as street children in Bangkok. These differences manifested themselves in the physical appearance of the film's characters, their names, the concept of 'the hero,' and the physical setting. They felt that many of the cartoon characters did not look Thai. They used the physical appearance of the characters and their names as clues to perceiving their origin. They, however, believed that these non-Thai looking and non-Thai named characters were still acceptable as Thai street children are used to watching international cartoon films, in which the characters do not look Thai or have a Thai name. They also believed that the characters' names were appropriate for the characters: 'If they had Thai names, it will create a conflict between their names and their faces. They do not look Thai, so they should not have Thai names.' Another respondent said, 'He looks international, not Thai. He should not have a Thai name. If he has a Thai name, it is a terrible.'

Respondents remembered the names of the 'Karate Kids' characters in interesting ways. They associated the characters' names by situating them in their own socio-cultural background. For example, the name 'Mario' was associated with a popular electronic game in Thailand called 'Super Mario'; 'Karate' with the popular Hollywood film called, 'Karate Kid' and with the Japanese story of 'Karate'; Roza with the canned Thai sardine food called 'Roza.'

According to the street children in our focus groups, the concept of the 'hero' as depicted in the 'Karate Kids' film was in some ways removed from reality of Thai street children. In the cartoon film, the hero, Karate, protects street children from danger: From diseases, police, and others. The street children said that in real life no such hero exists. They hoped they could find such a hero

or become one themselves, someday.

The focus group respondents provided several suggestions about revising the film's content. While they realized that a cartoon film is a caricature, they thought it should have depicted more human characteristics. They criticized the portraits of 'Karate Kids' characters, saying: 'The cartoon characters are too plain. Sometimes the main characters do not even have a nose ... so how can they breathe air? I'm glad they have a mouth. If not, they couldn't eat.' They suggested that 'It would be much better if the cartoon characters looked more realistic, like normal people'.

They also questioned the credulous nature of certain scenes, especially the one in which Mario got into the smiling-faced bad guy's car. The children wanted the film to depict the process of Mario being deceived more clearly for they were surprised that Mario did not run away from the stranger. In their world, they said they did not trust strangers and did not come near them if they doubted their intentions.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study, in general, provide support for the idea of creating entertainment-education programmes that can be shared across cultures. The study showed that on certain dimensions, the Thai street children found the educational messages of 'Karate Kids' to be culturally proximate to their own life-style, even though the film was not specifically made for them. On other dimensions, for instance, the physical appearance of the cartoon characters and the concept of a "hero" the street children felt that the film differed from their lived experiences.

While these subtle socio-cultural differences were detected between what the film depicted and the life experiences of our respondents, it did not seem to greatly increase the sense of distance between them and the film. Instead, the respondents continued to perceive 'Karate Kids' as an appropriate cartoon film for use in Thailand. This finding might also be explained by the widespread presence of international cartoon films in Thai society. In these imported cartoon films, the characters do not look Thai, do not have Thai names, and the setting is not Thai. Thai street children are thus accepting of cartoon films in which the characters and settings are not Thai. In fact, the respondents said that it would be unusual for them to see a cartoon film about Thai street children with Thai names and with a Thai setting.

The presence of some degree of cultural proximity between the film's content and the lived experiences of our respondents led the respondents to even more carefully compare the situations in the film with their personal life situations. If they found something in the film that differed from their lives, they showed a tendency to question it more seriously. For instance, the respondents were curious about why Mario did not run away from the smiling-faced bad guy.

From our investigation of the effects of entertainment-education cartoon film, 'Karate Kids', on street children in Thailand, we can derive certain general lessons about

the use of entertainment-education programmes across cultures:

1. *It is unlikely for a cross-cultural entertainment-education programme to be totally shareable when used in different cultures.* In the case of 'Karate Kids,' the viewers did not completely perceive the characters and setting as similar to their own socio-cultural context. However, the film, according to our respondents, was still effective in raising the respondents' knowledge and behavioural intentions related to HIV/AIDS prevention and control.

2. *By addressing universal educational themes and targeting audiences with similar demographic characteristics, entertainment-education programmes can potentially be effective in diverse socio-cultural contexts.* The results from the focus group discussions imply that the entertainment-education film, 'Karate Kids,' met many of its objectives in the Thai context. The film addressed the educational topic of HIV/AIDS (which has universal relevance) and the common culture of street children. A sense of socio-cultural proximity existed between the viewers' and the film's contents.

3. *The respondents' familiarity with a media genre — for example, cartoons — can help overcome some of the perceived shortcomings of the film.* While our respondents reported some differences existed between the characters' lives and their own lived experience, that did not seem to increase the sense of distance between the film and the respondents. This finding might be partially explained by the widespread presence of international cartoon films in Thai society. However, in countries where street children are not familiar with international cartoon films, the reactions to this film could be quite different.

4. *The producers of culturally-shareable entertainment-education programmes should try to pay careful attention to the local viewers' perceptions to maximize the educational effects of messages.* Overlooking small details in a film can lead viewers to question the film's appropriateness. For example, in 'Karate Kids,' viewers did not completely perceive the physical appearance of the characters as similar to the physical appearance of real street children. They questioned why the characters did not have noses like normal people. They also questioned several scenes that were close to their experience, especially the scene when Mario got into the smiling-faced-guy's car. The Thai street children wanted to observe the process, for instance, of Mario being deceived more clearly. While it would be impossible to incorporate all the viewers' suggestions from all cultures, a more broad-based approach to message pre-testing may help overcome some of these limitations.

5. *Entertainment-education programmes, especially those that employ the cartoon format, can deliver serious educational messages on HIV/AIDS cross-culturally.* A cartoon film can address sensitive messages about HIV/AIDS, HIV/AIDS patients, and HIV/AIDS prevention methods in a less 'taboo' and less threatening way than other formats, such as documentaries, public presentations, and the like. In addition, the cartoon format is attractive and humorous, and can hold the attention of viewers, especially of children who have limited attention

spans.

As the 'global village' becomes a reality, the 'glocal' and culturally-shareable media genres are bound to gain greater prominence worldwide. Whether they are used to promote commercial or social interests, or both, is to be seen.

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Continued from Page 146

behaviour in context, consensus and compromise, tolerance, conservatism in the world view.

(17-18) Topic of News

1. Military, defense, war, intelligence operations, political violence (1)
2. Foreign Relations, Political; Diplomacy (2)
3. Population and Family Planning (3)
4. Domestic Government, Political (4)
5. Labor and Employment (5)
6. Economic, Business, Finance, Trade (6)
7. Agriculture and Food production (7)
8. Science, Medicine, Health, Technology (8)
9. Education and Literacy (9)
10. Industrial (10)
11. Accidents, Disasters (11)
12. Judicial, Legal, Crime (12)
13. Energy, Environment, Conservation (13)
14. Housing, Construction (14)
15. Telecommunication, Postal, Tourism, and Transport (15)
16. Sports (16)
17. Arts, Culture, Entertainment, Mass Media (17)
18. Religion (18)
19. Ideology, History, Exhortations (19)
20. Communism: Bureaucracy, International (20)
21. Social, Human Interest/Bizarre (21)
22. Weather (22)
23. Sports scores (23)
24. Financial figures (24)
25. Commentary (25)
26. Safety (26)
27. Memorial, Obituary, Goodwill (greetings, commendations, etc.) (27)
28. Other (28)

(19) Dominant actor in the news:
Who is the primary focus of the story?

- (1) individual
- (2) organization, institution, group, community
- (3) Party
- (4) society
- (5) gov't
- (6) family/clan
- (7) nature
- (8) military, army
- (9) other

(20) Context

- (1) No context—item is presented as an isolated event; not background
- (2) Text Context—item placed in the on-going conditions in item; backgrounded
- (3) Hypertext Context—Provides a link to a previous story for context
- (4) Not Applicable—First time event, not appropriate for type of story, etc.

(21) Outside source of information cited?

No (1) Yes (2) N/A (0)

- (22) If No, (0) If Yes:
- | | |
|--|-----|
| AP (Associated Press) | (1) |
| Reuters | (2) |
| AFP (Agence France Presse) | (3) |
| UPI (United Press International) | (4) |
| PTI (Press Trust of India) | (5) |
| NCNA (New China News Agency or Xinhua) | (6) |
| Kyoto | (7) |
| Agencies | (8) |
| Other | (9) |

This paper was presented at the 7th AMIC Annual Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand from 21-23 May 1998.