

Extended Abstract

The Cartoon Characters with the Greatest Influence on Preschool Children and the Digital Dangers They Can Be Exposed to While Identifying with These Characters *

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Abstract

This study examines the cartoons preschool children view the most and the cartoon characters these children want and don't want to be, as well as the possible digital dangers these children could be exposed to during the identification process. The first part of the study is done with 182 children between 4-6 years old studying in various kindergartens and preschools in Bursa province. For the second part of the study, qualitative analysis has been conducted with 20 children selected using typical case sampling. This study uses the hybrid model, which consists of qualitative and quantitative methods. Data for the quantitative part of the study has been obtained through the Survey for Children about Cartoons which created by authors and for the qualitative part of the study through semi-structured interview questions. The validity and reliability studies of the survey were conducted. The opinions of the academicians who are experts in the fields of pre-school and psychological counseling have been consulted for content validity of the survey. The cartoon characters which children choose role models and the reasons why they choose these characters have been examined according to the gender variable. According to the findings, 53% of children watch cartoons such as Pepee, Rafadan Tayfa, Harika Kanatlar, Niloya, Karlar Ülkesi. While girls want to be characters such as Elsa and Bloom, boys want to be characters such as Jett and Spiderman. The qualitative findings show that children mostly consider themes such as physical appearance, supernatural abilities, gender, and the positive and the negative emotional states related to the character while selecting one.

Keywords

Early childhood • Character identification • Social learning • Cartoons • Role model

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Reports have stated the number of children, adolescents, and adults actively using the Internet to be two billion (Internet World Status, 2011, p. 790, as cited in [Giddens & Sutton, 2016](#)). Apparently, we all live in a digital world. Nothing wrong about the point where technology has brought us, but there is a legitimate concern about the threat of digital dangers in children's future. Answering questions such as "Are digital dangers well-enough known?" and "Are the preventions against digital dangers enough?" are important on this point ([Erdoğan & Baran, 2008](#); [Ertürk & Gül, 2006](#), p. 18). In a study on the most viewed cartoons, [Yıldız \(2016\)](#) found children to witness violence for an average of 4,220 seconds during in 39,495 seconds cartoon-watching session in most preferred 14 cartoons by children. Such as, "Ben 10" is a cartoon with some of the most violent scenes in each episode ([Yıldız, 2016](#)). [Wilson and Hunter \(1983\)](#) found an exact similarity between the violent behaviors displayed in 13 films and 13 TV shows with the 58 different violent behaviors observed among children. In a study conducted in a town in the USA, [Will \(1993\)](#) found violent behaviors to have increased 45% among girls and boys two years after being introduced to the TV in 1973. During the same period, the percentage of violent behavior stayed the same in a town that already had TV (p. 368, as cited in [Morris, 2002](#)).

[Lemish and Rice \(1986\)](#) stated that TV functions as a talking picture book for 12- to 18-month-old infants. On the other hand, lots of studies have shown that children get easily deceived by advertisements and can be bothered by advertising messages ([Huston, Watkins, & Kunkel, 1989](#); [Kunkel, 1988](#)). Children's obesity levels are explained by the time spent watching TV and advertisements' possible negative effects ([Ogle, Graham, Lucas-Thompson, & Roberto, 2017](#)).

In recent years, 2- to 12-year-old children have started to spend more time on Youtube alongside TV. They have started becoming consumers of Youtube content. This raises ethical issues about children's media consumption, especially those between two to seven years old ([Çaplı, 1996](#)).

Pre-school children's vulnerability to the attention-grabbing elements of digital media in the digital world is obvious ([İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi, 2016](#)). This is because they are more susceptible to external influences and their brains are not as developed as older children ([Ceci, Ross, & Togli, 1987](#), p. 504, as cited in [Cohen & Swerdlik, 2013](#)). [Ceci, Ross, and Togli \(1987\)](#) found younger children between three and four years old to be open to every environmental distractor, and to become less sensitive to information and directives received from adults as they get older. According to [Piaget \(1989\)](#), children three to six years old are egocentric and in a heteronomous (externally dependent) period. During this period, a child encountering the digital world accepts all the external stimuli, maybe even complying with them (as cited in [Kaya, 2012](#)). [Paik and Comstock \(1994\)](#) discovered violent scenes on TV

to have different impacts on children depending on personality traits. These types of scenes cause children to desensitize to violence, or to exercise the same types of behaviors and attitudes by means of identification. [Yetim and Sariçam \(2016\)](#) conducted a study where they investigated parents' content awareness of the cartoons their children regularly watch. Parents stated that their children do not talk to them about the cartoons' contents. [Yayan and Gümüşsoy \(2016\)](#) examined the imaginary in cartoons and found cartoons to have political, substance-use encouraging, indecent, and violent imageries as well as subliminal economic messages.

This study aims to examine if children between four and six years old are susceptible to digital dangers by means of how they identify with their favorite main cartoon characters. In order to do this, we have identified the popular cartoons among this age group during the interviews and the themes touched upon in these cartoons. This study is considered to be informative for educationists and parents about which characters children choose and why children choose them as role models. The data of this study is thought to be a helpful guide for educationists and parents in becoming good media-literate.

Method

Research Design

This study uses the hybrid model, which consists of qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative method has been used for verifying the most viewed cartoons and which characters children want or do not want to be. The qualitative method has been used for determining which emotional states and thoughts lead them in choosing these characters.

Sample

Four socioeconomically different districts in Turkey's Bursa province were chosen for collecting the quantitative data. The data have been collected from 182 participating children aged four to six in 10 schools. The qualitative analysis has been conducted with 20 children selected from the 182 children using typical case sampling. The 20 children have been selected according to their answers to the survey about their preferences for characters they want to be.

Data Collection

The Survey for Children About Cartoon was prepared for the quantitative part of the study to collect data for determining which cartoons are the most viewed and which characters children want to be or not be. The 20 children were asked semi-

structured interview questions in the qualitative part of the study about why they like or dislike the cartoon characters. The semi-structured interview questions were created with the help of two expert instructors.

Data Analysis

The quantitative and demographic part of the study has utilized frequency and percentage calculations in the descriptive statistical analysis. The qualitative part of the study conducts content analysis to analyze the data collected from the interviews.

Findings

The cartoons children in the study group watch most are respectively listed in order as “Pepee” (21), “Rafadan Tayfa” (19), “Super Wings” (15), “Niloya” (12), “Frozen” (11), “Spiderman” (9) and “Winx Club” (8). In addition, 53% of the entire study group watches these cartoons. “Cars Toons” (7), “Miraculous: Tales of Lady Bug and Cat Noir” (6) and “PJ Masks” (6) follow this list. The other finding is about which channels they watch these cartoons on. 61% of the children watch TRT (a public broadcasting channel funded by the government), followed by the Disney Channel and Kids Planet (private channels).

Boys and girls were asked in the second stage which cartoon characters they want to be the most. Boys chose the following answers the most: Jett (Super Wings; 13.7%), Spiderman (10.3%), and Lightning McQueen (Cars Toons; 9.2%), followed by Batman (8%), Superman (8%), Pepee (5.7%), and Cat Noir (5.7%). Almost all boys apparently chose characters who are also male. Seventeen girls (17.9% of the sample) stated wanting to be Elsa (Frozen) the most. The girls also stated wanting to be: Bloom (Winx Club; 10.5%), Niloya (10.5%), and Lady Bug (Miraculous: Lady Bug and Cat Noir; 7.4%). As with the boys, girls favored female cartoon characters. Gender discrimination is found in almost all cartoons except for the characters Pepee, Donnie (Super Wings), and Queen Bee and Lady Bug (Miraculous: Lady Bug and Cat Noir). Both the boys and girls like these characters.

In the third stage, the girls and boys were asked which cartoon characters they did not want to be. Boys’ answers are: Donnie (Super Wings; 8.2%), Gargamel (Smurfs; 4.6%), Spiderman (3.4%), Hapşu (Öğretmenim Canım Benim; 3.4%), Hulk (3.4%) and Batman (3.4%). The girls’ most unfavorable characters are: Pepee (9.4%), Spiderman (7.4%), and Lightning McQueen (6.3%). Witch (6.3%) and Hapşu (Öğretmenim Canım Benim; 4.2%) followed by these results. When examining the example statements, the main reason in choosing the least favored characters is because of being the opposite gender.

In the qualitative stage, 46 children were chosen to be interviewed; the study group became restricted to 20 children (11 girls, 9 boys) once the answers began to repeat.

In the content analysis conducted about which characters they want to be, five themes gained importance: ability, physical features, interest, personal characteristics, and expectations. The reasons given most for their choices are the characters' physical features ($n = 12$) and supernatural abilities ($n = 10$), followed by spell casting, physical power, domination, degrading group members, or acting superior. The children also mentioned their expectations often to be about: their dreams ($n = 6$), characters' temperament ($n = 5$), and their love for the character ($n = 5$). The least popular reason for choosing a character is social benefit ($n = 1$). The character chosen most is Elsa among the girls and Jett among boys. Examples of how they describe these characters follow:

I wished I was Jett. It is a fast, red airplane. It travels around the world and gives gifts to people and helps them. It is adventurous and has a fun life-style (Child 7, 6-year-old boy).

I wished I was Elsa. She has magical powers and is powerful because she can freeze everything and make them ice. She can make snow, too. Because of these powers, I wish to be her. She can freeze whoever she wants to. She froze her sister in one episode in fact. And whenever she wants to melt something, she wears her gloves and does it (Child 8, 5-year-old girl)

When conducting content analysis about the characters children do not want to be, four themes gain importance: physical features, personal characteristics, gender, and emotional status. When describing why they do not want to be these characters, the reasons given most are: the character's physical features ($n = 16$), gender ($n = 10$), and dis-likability ($n = 10$). Unfavorable actions ($n = 8$), gender roles ($n = 8$), and not being human ($n = 8$) were also frequently mentioned.

Discussion and Recommendations

Of the 182 children who participated in the study, 53% stated preferring to watch the cartoons "Pepee", "Rafadan Tayfa", "Super Wings", "Niloya", and "Frozen". This study's findings greatly overlap with those findings of [Oruç, Tecim, and Özyürek \(2011\)](#) and [Yıldız \(2016\)](#). Yıldız's study found no violent scenes in "Pepee". [Samur et al. \(2014\)](#) stated that teachers had criticized Pepee for a number of reasons, such as the family in the cartoons being isolated and Pepee being extremely emotional, talking to an imaginary friend, and not having a Turkish name. These findings overlap with the present study's findings on Pepee being young, crying a lot, and being boring. "Rafadan Tayfa" is in second place for the most viewed cartoon. In other study which investigated violent content in cartoons who preschool children watch most, Rafadan Tayfa's 2,196 seconds of show time is found 3% of which consists of verbal violence, 3% of which consists of psychological violence ([Yıldız, 2016](#)). This can be a digital danger by means

of cartoons, where violence can take place in children's consciousness. In addition, the same cartoon has varied contexts such as soccer, selfies, games, and Ankara Havası [Ankara Entertainment] (Yaralı & Avcı, 2017).

The most viewed cartoons are broadcast on the public channel TRT Çocuk (61%), followed respectively by Disney Channel and Kids Planet. Ertürk's (2007) study also confirms this finding. Children watch cartoons not only through television but also on the Internet. Cartoons watched on the Internet in particular may include inappropriate content such as virtual casinos, gambling, perverted belief systems, and illegal organizations. These pages are easily reached if a child attempts to access them. This situation make think that all children are vulnerable to digital dangers.

Girls chose the cartoon character, Elsa (Frozen) the most. When we examined their interview answers, the reason they chose this character is due to her physical appearance and ability to make ice. Turning some people to ice means they are destroyed. This has the potential of making children perceive destructive behavior as a normal thing. If we think to these children just between 4-6 years old, it may be dangerous for them to meet with destruction so early. A seemingly helpful and skillful thing can also be interpreted as having messages about harming others and violence in their essence. Girls also want to be cartoon characters such as the girls from "Winx Club", Rapunzel, Snow White, and Cinderella. The reasons are their physical appearances and beauty. One digital danger is how girls idolize characters in terms of their physical appearance and beauty. This may cause children to become perfectionists about their own physical appearance. They may even experience inadequacy because of their high standards. In addition, they may develop the habit of judging others according to physical appearance. In a study conducted by Kruttschnitt, Heath, and Ward (1986), children may keep the character they want to be like in their minds, even trying to resemble that character when they are older. The period where children want to freeze others like Elsa and fly like Bloom also coincides with 3- to 6-year-old period when children cannot distinguish fantasy from reality. Children in that age range can have difficulty returning from a fantasy world where supernatural forces and colorful imageries are presented back to reality.

Boys' criteria for choosing their favorite characters are supernatural skills and physical appearance (Yaşar & Paksoy, 2011). When examining the children's statements, their description of the characters is twofold: first they stated wanting to fly or have supernatural powers; second, they stated these characters to make them scared or to be bad, ugly, and naughty. This emotional overload and tension can create adverse psychological problems. Yetim and Sarıçam (2016) found parents to have insufficient knowledge about cartoons' content. They also let children choose which cartoons to watch and do not communicate with their children about the cartoons. This shows parents are somewhat aware of the possible dangers but do not know how to deal with them.

Children have also been found to want to be cartoon characters such as those in *Öğretmenim Canım Benim*, *Bay Becerikli*, and the father and mother in *Canım Kardeşim*. Children are known to want to fulfill an adult authority figure's wishes (Ceci, Ross, & Togli, 1987). Therefore, one should question if the messages given by an adult authority figure in the public eye on TV have been properly assessed (Büyükbaykal 2007; Ertürk & Gül, 2006). When considering the findings from the perspective of gender, statements have been encountered such as "I don't like him because he's a boy" and "I don't like her because she's a girl." In a study on newborns to eight year olds, Prior, Smart, Sanson, and Oberklaid (1993) stated gender differences to be minimal for infants with the gap increasing as one grows older. Children's perspectives on their own sex and gender issues are also generally shaped by cartoons. As a result, having experts carefully examine the content of cartoons is recommended. A resulting quote from Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK, 2005) reports, "For the last 30 years, research on mass communication has shown that as children are exposed to violent scenes in media, their tendency to display violent behaviors increases" (as cited in Ertürk & Gül, 2006, p.18). This situation shows that even today Turkey remains at the very beginning of the road toward protecting our children from digital dangers. Media can cause people to become exposed to violent, indecent content and subliminal messages. Also, spending a long-time watching TV can cause obesity. Therefore, having parents acquire skills on media literacy is important. Kremer and Vieira (2005) proposed that children develop skills for criticizing dangerous scenes, learning lessons from them, and applying what they learn to real world instances properly the more that parents have healthy talks with their children about the possible dangers of media, such as discussing how the child should behave when exposed to an inappropriate content. Complying with legal age limits for children's access to social media is important.

Qualitative analysis is not completely sufficient for understanding the themes in cartoons and the cartoon characters' effects on children. Therefore, making longitudinal or cross-sectional studies that are arranged according to children's different developmental periods is considered appropriate. In addition to this and when examining the results of similar studies in Turkey, the most frequently watched cartoons for one period are soon replaced by other cartoons. Perhaps the five most viewed cartoons will have been replaced by other cartoons by the time this study is published. Increasing the quantity and quality of RTÜK studies would be useful for protecting children from this rapid cycle, and having parents and teachers become aware of media literacy would also be a good practice.

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