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# Just pretty, responsible, and compliant?

## Girls' favourite characters

**Qualitative case studies and a representative survey investigated girls' and boys' favourite characters. The results: depending on the action-guiding topics, girls prefer successful, strong, at times cheeky, and tragic characters.**

When children watch television they (also) engage with the programme as girls and boys. They select the programme that interests them and get excited about the characters that appeal to them. Early on, girls and boys are already aware of the gender differences presented to them on television (Thompson/Zerbinos, 1997). They prefer characters of the same sex as well as girl- or boy-related actions (Knobloch et al., 2005; Signorielli, 1997). Research conducted in this field points to a clear-cut bipolarity: girls focus on relationships, appreciate beauty, social competencies, and compliance, while boys favour strong, active male characters who manage to assert themselves in hazardous environments and situations of physical conflict (Theunert, 2005, p. 19). Preferences seem to be unequivocal and unchanging: "Cowboy and princess since Adam and Eve", as Silvia Knobloch and Annett Fritzsche put it succinctly (2004). But is it really as simple as that: girls inclined towards beautiful, responsible, and compliant girl characters and boys towards boy characters that prevail in fights or does research merely

re-identify the gender stereotypes presented in television broadcasts? What is it that makes characters attractive in children's minds? Which role does a favourite television character assume in the context of identity formation and life management? These are the questions posed by the IZI study "The Meaning of Television Characters for Girls and Boys", in the course of which gender-oriented case studies were conducted with 40 girls and 40 boys between the ages of 8 and 11. Based on these results we developed a standardised interview questionnaire on favourite TV characters and their utility value. 2,178 children between the ages of 6 to 12 were interviewed in 3 consecutive surveys.

The results are diverse and can only be introduced rudimentarily here. This article focusses on girls' favourite characters while Reinhard Winter's and Gunter Neubauer's contribution covers the preferences of boys (see Winter/Neubauer in this issue).

## Girls' typical engagement with their favourite characters

In our life-world analysis we investigated in detail the question as to what action-guiding topics girls (and boys) were motivated by and what kind of engagement and interpretations they develop in relation to their favourite characters. These cases

were collected on a nationwide basis and across various socio-economic strata. When comparing the reconstructions of the individual cases, five typical patterns of girls' (and boys') engagement with the characters become evident. Audience-oriented media analysis (Bachmair, 1993) and the representative quality of the sample subsequently enabled us to determine statements reflecting the characters' essential features that facilitate this particular type of engagement and a specific utility value.

### *1. Recognising oneself and feeling reassured*

*Bibi Blocksberg, Lizzie McGuire and Stephanie from LazyTown*

The most frequent type of engagement emerging between children and their favourite character can be described as "recognising oneself and feeling reassured". Girls discover something in the character that is central to their own identity formation and self-image. This may be the character as a whole or certain action and interpretation patterns, which they recognise and regard as important and right for themselves. An example case:

Clarissa (9 years) attends the fourth grade and she enjoys a good rapport with her parents who both work for the police force. At home she tries to deal with the rules her parents set out, especially tidying her room, and she likes to test the boundaries. On this point, her favourite character Bibi Blocksberg provides her with symbolic material. Bibi tests the boundaries – just like she does, some-

times overstepping what her parents say, and yet still finding her way eventually, so that her parents are never permanently annoyed. The character and its actions make Clarissa feel reassured in being cheeky once in a while.

The features these characters share – in the girls' idiosyncratic interpretation – are their social situations (parent-child relationship, circle of friends, etc.), their physical features (small, a little bit overweight), and their problems. Television characters with high utility value “having the same experi-



Clarissa and her favourite character, the witch Bibi Blocksberg

ences” are Sabrina from *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and also Lizzie McGuire, T. J. from *Disney's Recess*, Juniper Lee or Raven. Characters with highest utility value (“we are often feeling in the same way”) are for instance Stephanie from *LazyTown*, Yugi, Heidi or Lilo from *Disney's Lilo & Stich*.

## 2. Copying character facets (identification)

*Soap characters, Spinelli from Disney's Recess, Hermione Granger* “Identifying with a character” is a common way to describe the child-character-relationship and a specific interpretation of the film (cf. Cohen, 2001). In the narrower sense of the word, identification is defined as a process “by which a subject assimilates an aspect, a characteristic, an attribute of another person and modifies his/her behaviour completely or partially according to that chosen model” (Laplanche/Pontalis in Mikos, 1994, p. 72). While it does in fact occur that girls adapt to television characters, this

happens much less frequently than commonplace theory may suggest. At times, girls directly integrate only selected qualities into their identity formation; and at other times, it is the character as a whole, its interpretation patterns, clothes, etc. A case example:

Leonie is 10 years of age, and a fourth grade pupil living with her 3 siblings in Bavaria. She is fascinated by the topic of girl and boy gender attributions. She takes pleasure in bickering and wrestling and likes to tease others (for instance her sis-

of interaction. They empathise with (varying) characters, understanding actions, behaviour, and social interrelations from their point of view. While the character itself is important, the story, the problem or the social structure are really what it is about. Take, for instance, Jasmin's case:

Jasmin is 11 years of age and with a high degree of social intelligence she observes, reflects, and recognises the social networks of her peer group. She makes a deliberate effort to fit into these networks



Leonie and her favourite character Spinelli

ter). She would prefer to break out of the constraints school puts on her and become a fashion model instead.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, Leonie discovered her all-time favourite cartoon character: Spinelli from *Disney's Recess*. She is the one who made her realise that girls are allowed more than just being good and pretty. Leonie especially likes the way Spinelli speaks her mind, enthusiastically disrupts the class, and passionately wrestles with boys. Full of fervour, Leonie announces that, now, she does that, too: “Because I realised that as a girl I am also allowed to wrestle with boys. I now have the courage to do that.” Ever since Spinelli became her favourite cartoon character Leonie has had her hair cut short and she has also changed otherwise. She no longer wants to be just a good, conforming girl.

## 3. In step with and understanding the world

*Sabrina the Teenage Witch, Angela Anaconda and Yugi*

Some girls browse television programmes from an observer perspective for interesting problem-solving strategies, social networks, and forms

– not as the trendsetter, but virtually as the trendsetter's companion who acts morally (more) responsibly. Jasmin picks out TV series that present and give a platform for friendships in a multi-faceted way (*Friends, Angela Anaconda*). She enjoys stories about friendship and rivalry and claims to learn a lot from them that she can use herself. Her favourite character is Angela Anaconda, according to her a “zany, wacky girl that never gives up”. From Angela's heterogenic circle of friends and her conflict with her arch rival Nanette Manoir, Jasmin gains knowledge about the interrelations of the social world. If she were a character in the programme, however, she would choose to be Gina Lash, Angela's best friend – incidentally one of the few obese characters on current children's TV.

TV characters with high utility value to follow through the story and to understand how to deal with friends or how to solve problems are: Bibi Blocksberg, Yugi from *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, Sabrina the Teenage Witch or the Powerpuff Girls for example.

#### 4. Parasocial relationship

*Lisa Simpson, Sabrina and Pippi Longstocking*

Some girls engage in parasocial interactions with their favourite characters, in other words they imagine a relationship with the characters as the person they are. The favourite character can take on a variety of functions in this case. Often they are friends with whom they hurl themselves into adventures or to whom they confide secrets. Svenja (11 years) selected a character (Selda from *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*), because it served as a (better) mother. Ira (9 years) chose a boy character to fall in love with (the embryonic stage). In other case studies the favourite character took on the role of an imaginary friend who comes to the rescue: unconditionally supportive and able to save kids from hairy situations.

This type of engagement pattern is evident for both girls and boys. While boys' favourite characters are slightly more frequently instrumentalised as the "companion for adventure" or the "friend to the rescue", girls very often have a parasocial relationship with "a media character that is a trusted girlfriend". TV characters that can achieve this parasocial interaction with girls are for instance Lisa Simpson, Sabrina from *Sabrina: The Animated Series*, Pippi Longstocking or Kim Possible.

#### 5. Having fun and experiencing pleasure

*SpongeBob SquarePants, Lilly the Witch and Kim Possible*

For some girls, the relationship with their favourite character is not so much marked by intellectual gratification as by fun and pleasurable experiences. These may be joyful additions to an otherwise pleasant and fulfilling daily routine. At the same time it may be a specific way for them to create, by using, for instance, comical characters, a well-needed compensation for taxing identity forma-

tion and life management. Girls have a higher-than-average utility value in this respect when it comes to the TV characters Sabrina (*Sabrina: The Animated Series*), Lilly the Witch, the Powerpuff Girls, SpongeBob SquarePants and Kim Possible.

#### What renders a character a girls' favourite?

The study points out that what renders a television character a girls' favourite differs from girl to girl. It depends entirely on the respective topics, ways of processing, and conceptions of the world.

Among other things, the utility value (Götz, 2002) is determined by the character's basic constitution.

First and foremost, a character needs to be largely reliable and predictable in terms of its attributes and social integration. In today's media landscape, this factor is provided by the serialisation of programmes, which are regularly broadcast and frequently repeated in various episodes every evening.<sup>2</sup> It is thus that trends of children's culture are established. Anyone who does not know about the famous characters, for instance from the hugely popular German Daily Soap *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* (*Good Times, Bad Times*), cannot join in the conversation. Girls (too) "must" know who Yugi from *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is in order to be "hip". These trends emerge as a result of the immense popular appeal of a programme, its novelty value, and to a certain degree they are deliberately targeted by the broadcasters.

While this may explain the focus on certain characters, it needs to be appreciated that not even the most cleverly advertised character will become

a favourite unless it meets with children's needs, thus providing content-related utility value. This subjective preference also varies from person to person.

#### Do favourite characters have to be beautiful and slim?

The appearance of a character may play an important role if this is a central topic for the girl.

Thus, Leonie notes that Spinella (*Disney's Recess*) "looks quite sassy with her pigtails and her hat". Julia, who seeks teenage role models, gives the following reason as to why she chose a character like that: "I think she's pretty". For some girls, indeed, "appearance" is an issue (see also Hains in this issue). It is not accurate to conclude, however, that girl characters generally need to conform to a stereotypical image of ideal beauty. To some girls the "soapy", non-resistant beauty of a soap star may be of importance. Others admire precisely the quirky, idiosyncratic or "unpretty" look, such as embodied in the main characters of *Ugly Betty*.

Furthermore, the thesis that slightly plump figures would spark off too much resistance on the part of the audience and, thus, inhibit positive engagement with the characters was refuted by the case studies.

Jasmin (11 years) would gladly participate in the action as Gina Lash, a rather corpulent character. Thus, the character's body does not present an obstacle to Jasmin, who still feels empathy in this case,

and incidentally is herself a slim girl. From her point of view the vital aspect is Gina Lash's morally justified and respectable behaviour.

### Do favourite characters have to be socially responsible and compliant?

It especially matters for some girls, such as Clara (9 years), that characters such as the girl Molle from the German series *Neues aus dem Süderhof* act “nicely”: “She’s quite nice, doesn’t bother anybody, and she likes everyone”. Clara is more attracted by the positive approach to life that Molle personifies. Brigitte (10 years) likes a Daily Soap character “because she’s reserved and everything, and she’s helpful”. To her, this paves the way to more popularity with other pupils and to fewer embarrassing situations, which she can prove on the basis of the series’ plot. Thus, compliance can be of considerable importance to some girls. In this study, however, this was just a very small group. Most girls are mainly interested in a character’s self-determined action. Lea (9 years) is a good example. She appreciates about her favourite character Nola (*Flipper & Lopaka*): “That she’s so bold and when something rubs her up the wrong way she needs to change that.” Julia (10 years) likes about her favourite character Lolle, a young adult (*Berlin, Berlin*): “That she is just the way she is, and some don’t like that (the way Lolle is), but she will just speak her mind.” Julia sees in Lolle a personality who does things her own way without adjusting to her environment. Several girls seem to feel that a certain cheekiness spices up the character. For instance, Martina who particularly loves about Bibi Blocksberg that she “is a little cheeky”, while remaining within the boundaries of mature and responsible behaviour. To act in a socially responsible way matters to many, though not all the girls. Lena (9 years), for instance, likes Bart Simpson especially when he oversteps the mark and acts inconsiderately towards others. Verena (9 years) enjoys the times when SpongeBob ig-

nore his chores with relish. It does occur, thus, that characters appeal to a girl precisely when they overstep the boundaries for egotistic reasons.<sup>3</sup>

### Just pretty, responsible, and compliant?

Girls are mainly looking for girl and woman characters – but also boy and man characters – whom they can utilise for their life management and identity formation. The reasons for girls appointing special meaning to certain characters in their everyday life are manifold.

Beauty does feature as an important criterion – but certainly not for every girl. Many girls place importance on socially-responsible action, yet there are exceptions to that. Most importantly, the character needs to behave in a self-determined way. While some (a few) girls find compliant behaviour worth striving for, others are drawn to the cheeky and rebellious actions. Successful behaviour is valued by most girls, yet not without counter-examples, such as the tragic figure of Betty from *Ugly Betty* who gains her appeal because she is unhappy and always misunderstood.

The multitude of girls’ inclinations is only met by a limited supply of role models. Not only are girl and woman characters outnumbered by boy and man characters, but certain basic character constructions and social constellations are exclusively available as male concepts in children’s television programmes. Hence, there is an urgent need to make up the gap in order to do justice to the diversity and complexity of girls’ preferences. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here, at the latest, the complex process of identity formation is clear for girls. For Leonie, being a model in no way means “being beautiful”, but rather just being special or unique.

<sup>2</sup> We can assume that books and book-based media adaptations such as, for instance, Harry Potter provide similar reliability. They, too, are meaningful during the many weeks of reading – and this on a reliably repeated year-to-year basis.

<sup>3</sup> The fact that these latter examples are boy characters just goes to show how character preferences rely on supply. There is currently no female equivalent to Bart Simpson who zestfully breaks rules, not caring for the social consequences, and who does not even spare his parents from his, at times, evil pranks. Yet, these characteristics do appeal to girls, too.

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