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# What makes them so special?

## The utility value of children's favourite heroes and heroines

**How does a “normal” television character become a favourite television character among children? The answer lies in the utility value which it has for children's everyday life and their identity work. This article summarises the results of studies on children's favourite TV characters, their “usefulness” from a kid's perspective and interconnections to market dynamics.**

Every week at least 900 main characters from children's television are available, but children only choose specific ones as their favourite characters. Who are they and why are kids so attracted by them? In face-to-face interviews, 716 representatively selected 6- to 12-year-olds were asked about their favourite characters in the last month of 2010, providing data for a ranking of the most popular characters in Germany<sup>1</sup> at that time.

Among the boys, SpongeBob is the most frequently named character, followed by Ben 10 and the cheeky Bart Simpson. Among the girls, Hannah

Montana is the leading character, followed at a good distance by Barbie and Kim Possible (cf. table 1). Regarding the 23 most frequently mentioned characters, clear age and gender affinities can be made out (see ill. 1). For young children, characters like Benjamin

the Elephant, Bob the Builder, and Bibi Blocksberg are attractive, while for older ones Homer and Bart Simpson or Dieter Bohlen (the juror of the German version of *Pop Idol*) are appealing. Storytelling, aesthetics, themes, values, and genre are understandable reasons for these tendencies.

The evaluation of gender affinities is especially interesting. In 2010, a clear splitting of the market becomes apparent: most of the favourite characters are clearly positioned on one or the other side in terms of gender affinity, which means that they were mainly mentioned by either girls or boys (cf. ill. 1). Kim Possible or Bibi Blocksberg, for example, are named predominantly by girls and only by a few boys. Mr. Bean or Scooby Doo are mainly boys' favourite TV characters, and only a few girls mention them. On top of that, there are “boys-only” and “girls-only” characters. Those are, for example, Bob the Builder, Batman, or Homer Simpson on the boys' side, and Lisa Simpson, Hannah Montana, or Princess Lillifée on the girls' side. Only a few charac-

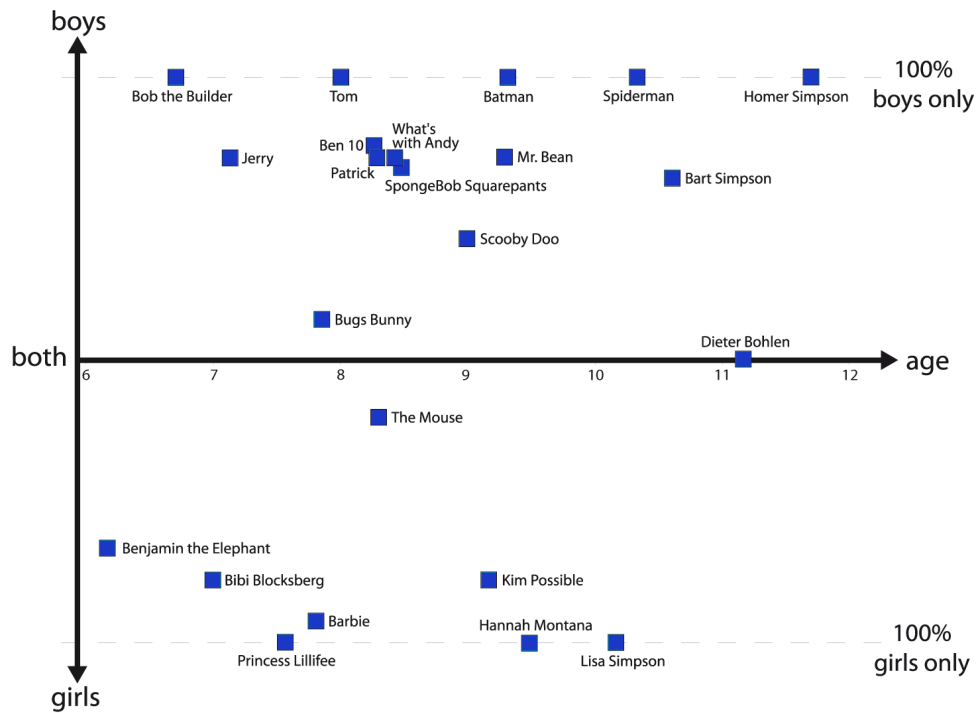
Boys	Girls
SpongeBob (18 %)	Hannah Montana (28 %)
Ben 10 (9 %)	Barbie (7 %)
Bart Simpson (6 %)	Kim Possible (5 %)
Batman (5 %)	SpongeBob (4 %)
Bob the Builder (4 %)	Bibi Blocksberg (3 %)
Homer Simpson (3 %)	Princess Lillifée (2 %)
Source: IZI, 4 <sup>th</sup> quarter 2010 Basis: n=716 children aged 6-12, rep. random sample	

Tab. 1: Children's favourite TV characters in Germany (6-12 years)

ters can be found in the middle of the affinity graph which means that they are more or less equally attractive for girls and boys. Among them are, for instance, the Mouse from the *Show with the Mouse*, Germany's 40-year-old icon for high-quality children's TV, Bugs Bunny, or Dieter Bohlen (*Pop Idol*). Compared to the data of 2007, 2006, and 2005, an interesting tendency becomes apparent: 3, 4, and 5 years ago, the market of children's favourite TV characters was much less gender-divided, and many more characters were located in the middle of the affinity graph (cf. Götz, 2007, p. 23; Götz, 2011).

### TV characters as brands

The current favourite television characters have entered the TV marketplace in quite different ways. *Bob the Builder*, *Kim Possible*, or the *Simpsons* were successful series first and were then followed by various licensed products. *Batman* and *Spiderman* are based on comic books. They were extended to different se-



Ill. 1: Age and gender affinities of the 23 favourite TV characters

ries, but their current prominence in children's culture is due to the feature films and various licensed products. At the beginning, *Bibi Blocksberg* was mainly popular and successful through various audio-plays. Finally, a cartoon series followed that made her increasingly and permanently important to children. Hence, most of the "older" favourite TV characters which were already present in the studies of 2005 to 2007 found their way into the TV marketplace more or less through a traditional analysis chain (cf. Hofmann/Schmid, 2002), namely from a TV series to a licence topic, or from a book to a TV series to a licence topic.

The connections become even more dynamic and complex in the case of "new" favourite characters. *Hannah Montana* was, from the very beginning, conceived by the Disney Company as a media and event arrangement in which the television series, concerts, corresponding reports in the teeny press, a separate magazine, and various licensed products would mesh together (cf. Bulla in this issue). Over many decades, Barbie was

"only" a doll which then, beginning in 2001, became successful as an animated film in which Barbie "plays" a leading role in fairy tales and fantasy stories; with her TV films and series she has been gaining an increasing percentage of the television market among primary school girls. In addition, Barbie is also successful as a licence theme for clothes and accessories, even though she looks different from a graphic point of view. A great surprise in the current data is the frequent reference to *Princess Lillifee*. The brand is based on a book, but is mainly a licence theme that includes, among other things, a musical, an animated feature film, and 6 additional 10-minute episodes of a live-action dance education series. She is still not a television character in the traditional sense, but is, nonetheless, perceived as one by many girls. All of these "new" TV characters with complex analysis chains are "girls-only" or "nearly girls-only" characters (see ill. 1). They are "new", market-driven brands, which are purposefully targeted at girls. It is necessary to understand why they are

successful while many other brands do not enter the status of a frequently mentioned favourite TV character; a turn towards the children's side is needed. These brands are meaningful for the girls or boys in everyday life and have a "utility value" for them.

### Excursus: IZI studies on "utility value"

An understanding of the utility value of media characters is a logical turn towards the children's side. In the centre of the perspective is the girls' and boys' interpretation and view of

the character, the way they develop a relationship with them, and what this means for their daily lives and in terms of their identity development. Measuring the utility value is a core theme in IZI research, which the IZI has been working on for nearly a decade (Götz, 2002, 2007, 2011).

The starting point were 80 individual case analyses of children as well as international case studies with teenagers examining the significance of children's favourite television characters in everyday life and in the context of identity development. It became clear how profoundly the favourite television characters enter the identity construction of girls and boys: their favourite characters repeatedly reflect their philosophy of life and self-concepts. Sometimes they represent an expression of what is felt but cannot yet be articulated. But sometimes the favourite character also symbolises the things the children are not supposed to do and in that way confirms their own self-image.

Parallel to these story-related aspects, children's favourite programmes shape part of their coming-to-terms

with everyday life. Often, the reception acts as a place of retreat for children, one in which emotions may be experienced which balance or complement everyday life. It can also help, for example, to shape the communication within the family. In discussing the series among peers, a sense of community is established with friends, one can distance oneself from others, etc. These typical meaning-making patterns with the favourite TV character can be found among children and young people in Germany, but became also apparent in international studies in South Africa, India, or the USA (cf. McMillin, 2009).

On the basis of these findings a standardised method for the analysis of the utility value was developed, tested, and refined on over 2,000 children. Meanwhile, we have employed this “utility value system” in various format developments and have used it to analyse the current favourite television characters from the end of 2010. In addition to the standardised test with a representative sample of German 6- to 12-year-olds, we conducted studies, among others, with fans of *Hannah Montana*, *Princess Lillifee*, *SpongeBob*, and Dieter Bohlen (Götz, 2011). The results open up new perspectives regarding the understanding of the current trends and the gender-divide among the favourite characters.

### **What makes a character a favourite character?**

There are some interesting results that can be drawn from the statistical data gained in the representative study on the utility value of the favourite TV characters.

The analysis of the answers of 716 children, with respect to their relationship with their favourite TV character, showed that some aspects seem to be more important for most of the kids than others. The favourite TV character is someone who touches them in an emotionally positive way. Watch-

ing the show, spending time with the character, and having fun with her or him arouses a really good feeling. The triggers that provoke this feeling with girls and boys can be very different and depend, for example, on the children’s sense of humour. Often, the favourite television character is imagined to be a very good friend to play with or an ideal elder sibling. For the children in front of the TV screen the favourite character is often the “connecting character” to the story. The children view the stories,

so to speak, through the eyes of the characters and reflect on what they would have done in her or his place. In this way, particular competencies are derived from the character’s behaviour and interconnections are understood. On this basis, children are able to adapt or avoid the behaviour patterns of their favourite characters. Beside all this, there are also more content-driven utility values: the most frequently mentioned favourite characters are those which the child’s best friend also likes a lot. This does not mean that there are no children who have a favourite character that they alone like, but most children look for characters that are part of the latest trend. Thus, presence and communicability are factors that are decisive in determining whether a particular character is really useful for a child. Quite a lot of this value can be attributed to the character’s

presence in children’s everyday lives besides TV, for example through licensed products. Here, smart marketing departments step in and fulfil the children’s desires: to have something which goes beyond TV, sticks to the same values, styles, and stories as the show, and which offers opportunities for identity work and possibilities to make the result of this inner process visible. From the child’s perspective, it is not just the character Bart Simpson, that is shown on a T-Shirt, but rather a representation of their own development, i.e. something highly individual, something that can be seen and recognised by others through the licensed product (cf. Ekström and Cada/Götz in this issue). From a pedagogical point of view or a public broadcasting perspective, we may not like this at all, but we have to acknowledge that licensed products foster the utility value of a TV show for the children. But how did this tendency foster the gender-divide among the favourite TV characters?

The current trends – especially when it comes to “new(er) brands” like *Hannah Montana* and *Princess Lillifee*, or “reviving characters” like *Spiderman* or *Batman* – follow gender-specific licensing strategies. When it comes to selling licences, the brands clearly draw back on a bipolar understanding of gender. Colours, clothes, toys, etc. are stereotypically combined. The results are “boys-only” and “girls-only” “360 degree brands” targeting different media and all kinds of products, but always following the same gendered manner and attitude. One strong reason behind this is the applied internal logic. Marketing departments do not aim at fostering children’s individual identity development or balancing gender stereotypes. Often, their view is not even content-oriented, but rather focuses on choosing the right commercial partners and material, and avoiding any kind of scandal (cf. Götz, 2009, p. 60). Their job is to sell licences and to make sales volume.

The most common way to achieve these goals is to travel old trails, i.e. to use what has proven to work well, and to extend those ways. The results are systematic marketing campaigns and 360 degree media arrangements which offer children a 24/7 presence of their favourite TV characters. Smart marketing departments of commercial broadcasters – by now the backbone of worldwide networks and marketing experience in view of merchandising and moneymaking – are very well aware of the fact that there is no overall target group called “the children” but rather different age groups, and that it is more appropriate to target girls and boys separately. As likely as not, this is one of the reasons why “newer brands” have a more extensive concept from the very beginning and are much more gender-specifically targeted.

### Understanding the attractiveness of single characters

Branding is one thing, but no TV character becomes a favourite character if its stories are not linked to something which is meaningful for children on a deeper level. To grasp the concrete utility value of a certain television character, we first profiled favourite characters from the standardised survey. This provided an initial overview of the significant features of this character in comparison with the average of all favourite characters. To get a deeper insight into the interpretation and meaning of a character in the children’s everyday life, we additionally carried out various qualitative studies. Particularly from a gender-specific perspective, the results shed light on the current market situation.

### Girls: a search for ideals, accompanied by a desire to rediscover themselves

Among girls, Hannah Montana is the most popular television character by a

large margin. If we take a look at the quantitative data, it becomes even clearer: at the moment the show is exceptionally successful, especially among pre-teens, and seems to outdistance any of the other 900 characters that German TV offers (see figure 1).

In a qualitative study among 115 girls who are fans of Hannah Montana there is one thing that becomes obvious immediately: girls enjoy the show, especially in its comedy moments. The media analysis of 10 randomly selected episodes displays: the show has a comic element with a laughter track every 8 seconds on average. Beyond these comical moments, Hannah/Miley offers the highest utility value: her fans are sure that they can learn a good deal from her about how to handle problems and how to form a friendship. They feel that, since they started watching the programme, they act and are a little bit like Hannah Montana. And the best friend likes Hannah, too. Of course the girls also have to know her to be “in” and enjoy the music and all the possibilities the broad media arrangement offers.

Beside these more or less obvious reasons for Hannah Montana’s success, there is a much deeper gender-specific level on which the show addresses typical girls’ issues. Miley (and to an even greater degree Hannah) reflects adolescent girls’ wish-fulfilment fantasies

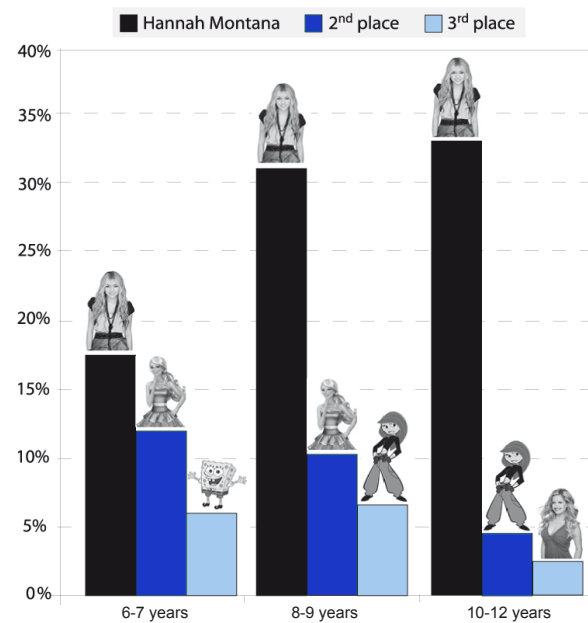


Fig. 1: Favourite TV characters in Germany (girls 6-12)

and symbolises typical tween identity development. Girls simultaneously regard themselves as remarkably competent like Hannah – for example in certain school subjects – while also concentrating on their deficiencies and regarding themselves as something of a Miley. They enjoy the humour which is fed into the show every 8 seconds and the cool way, in which Miley handles all problems and awkward situations (Götz/Bulla, 2011).

The girls who rave about the secret agent Kim Possible report that they identify with her during the programme and then consider how Kim might respond to events in their own everyday lives. The action scenes and Kim’s outstanding competence provide straightforward fun. For her

fans, Kim would be an ideal friend and a great sister.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, according to the girls, the character who currently gives the most accurate reflection of their real daily challenges is Lisa Simpson. She, too, lives in a world in which many people fail to make correct moral deci-



sions, and boys repeatedly get up to mischief. In feminist literature, girls around the age of 9 are considered very gifted in terms of interpretation (Brown/Gilligan, 1992). Their social intelligence is strongly pronounced and enables them to see and judge the social world around them and to name all the things that are morally right or wrong.

Among younger girls in the study, the media character that reflects their "emotional reality" best is Bibi Blocksberg. 6- to 9-year-olds feel that Bibi would get excited or angry about the same things they do, but they would also love to be a little witch themselves, able to arrange everything just as they imagine with the simple spell "Hex hex!" In this way, the character becomes a springboard for age-specific fantasies of grandeur. For the youngest of the age groups, as we found in a qualitative study, Princess Lillifee is very attractive for girls (and their mothers) mainly because she embodies typical femininity without this being spelled out in greater detail. The girls enjoy being loved and appreciated like a princess. Often, the colour pink is an aesthetical experience for them and symbolises, on a deeper level, a separation from being "boyish". The mothers report that they are very pleased with their girls' enthusiasm and let them have many things which they were not allowed to enjoy in their own childhood. While socialising a girl "girlishly" meant reducing her opportunities 30 years ago, girls are nowadays clearly ahead

of boys in terms of their competence, and boys are rather seen as "problematic". Therefore nowadays, enjoying and wearing Princess Lillifee (or other pink media arrangements) often does not present a problem for mothers anymore. They even foster it and express their pride in being a girl or a woman by means of these "pink characters" (Götz/Cada, 2009). Although this does not always become quite as obvious as it does in the case of Lillifee, gender does play a role: the tendency is for girls to choose female characters as their favourites. In girls' top 10 there are only very few masculine exceptions such as SpongeBob or Bart Simpson (cf. table 1). They cover the topics that are usually only told with boy characters, such as being very cheeky, reckless joie de vivre, and the crossing of boundaries. Overall, the study shows girls seeking characters in which they can rediscover themselves, peers whose thoughts they share. They watch girls who have a lot of fun and find their own way, who behave in a sweet, cheeky way that is also morally in accord with ideal conceptions of a "good girl". The characters illustrate aspects that are closely allied with the current situation of girls. They have "girl power", they "reinvent girlhood" (Currie/Kelly/Pomerantz, 2009). The market has identified this. Smart companies like Disney offer girls media brands that tackle exactly those themes which are relevant to them and that offer enough space for fantasy and self-construction. The strategy behind it is clearly gendered, no matter if a de-genderisation might have worked in the same way or even better.

#### **Boys' heroes: "funny losers" and "techies"**

SpongeBob continues to be the boys' favourite character, far and away and

for the fifth year in a row. Compared to the data from 2005, SpongeBob becomes more and more "boy-affine" while at the same time losing his girl fans. Probably this has very little to do with the character and the stories themselves, but can be traced back to the general market trend offering more brands directly targeting girls. In comparison to the data of 2007, SpongeBob's audience has become "older" again. While in 2007 the average child calling him his/her favourite TV character was 6.7 years, he/she is now 8.5 years on average. But nevertheless, SpongeBob has been extraordinarily successful over the last 5 to 10 years.

SpongeBob's popularity is built on his positive, naïve personality, his skills, and an abundance of child-friendly humour. Beside the relatively obvious comical moments of the programme, its themes also enter deeper layers of children's minds. The show deals with deeper identity themes like overestimation of self, experience of loss, and friendship difficulties, but it does so in a comic fashion that offers boys in particular permission to deal more easily with these difficult topics.

Ben 10 occupies second place in the popularity ratings. Underlying the boys' enthusiasm is a fantasy of grandeur based on technology, supporting their desire to cope with challenges through transformation. Boys value how he behaves towards his friends, and could very well imagine him as their brother.

Third place is occupied by the loutish

Bart Simpson, who reflects precisely what boys, in their own view, experience every day. Everybody wants something from you, which you cannot deliver, but through practical jokes and cunning you can still have a lot of fun and outwit others. Still, boys know that this is obviously not the right way to negotiate problems, and do therefore not try to learn anything from Bart. Older boys are also drawn to Homer Simpson as an absolute anti-hero, standing for all the things you are not supposed to do.

As in previous years, boys clearly seek out 2 different types of male characters. "Funny losers" (e.g. SpongeBob, Bart and Homer Simpson) make up their own rules and, in the process, achieve respect by their abundance of humour. By contrast, the "I can find a way to do it all" hero (e.g. Ben 10, Batman, Bob the Builder) is armed against life's demands by technology.

This reflects the typical gender-specific way in which today's boys negotiate challenges. Some consider themselves exceptionally capable and use every opportunity afforded them, particularly from new technologies. Others find that they are not quite able to line up to their challenges and, in order to keep their self-confidence intact, simply redefine the challenges. Thus, they can still define themselves as winners by means of a good prank or a clever joke (cf. Winter, 2008).

While some of the "funny losers" also appeal to girls, the "techie" and his way of solving problems in an often aggressive or oversimplified way seems to be less attractive to them. Here, the market trend of creating brands that focus on boys, boyish toys, etc. in particular seems to be a cause of the gender-divide. From a pedagogical point of view, this is a missed chance for girls to treat technology as a rich resource which helps widen one's possibilities and consider it a pool for fantasies of grandeur.

### Favourite characters and the marketplace – a win-win situation?

Favourite characters are part of identity work and help children to define themselves inwardly and show this on the outside, while negotiating their sense of identity with others. The licence offerings increase the utility value of favourite television characters. In this respect, it is necessary to take children seriously even in their dealings with brands and licences as "meaning-making beings" (Cook, 2010).

It is not surprising that the most frequently mentioned television characters are mainly aired on private-commercial channels which provide a broad multimedia spectrum.

From a pedagogical perspective, this should be viewed critically. It is a self-intensifying dynamic that goes hand in hand with peer pressure and a divestment of identity. In addition to the required financial resources that are not always available to every child, the driving force behind the licence offers is not the well-being of girls and boys but rather sales. Accordingly, a critical discussion is called for in this context, since, even though this might represent a win-win situation for certain individuals, the dynamics are marked by unequal power relations and exploitation. Reality has created facts and one cannot blame children when they take advantage of their opportunities. So far there has not been any broader discussion on quality in licensing and "360 degree media brands". But this discussion is definitely needed, not only among the marketing departments and salespersons but also among those who speak up for children and their well-being. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Representative random sampling implemented by Iconkids & Youth, Munich, Germany

<sup>2</sup> Ben 10 and all related characters and elements are trademark of and © 2010 Cartoon Network. A Time Warner Company. All Rights Reserved

<sup>3</sup> And also for the boys who named her as their favourite TV character

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