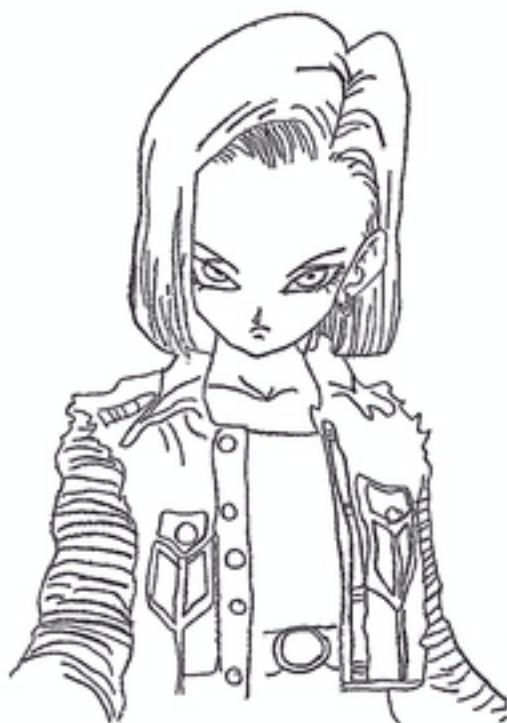


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TV-Hero(in)es of Boys and Girls

Reception Studies of Favorite Characters



PETER LANG
EDITION

Introduction

TV is still the leading medium in children's lives. It is no question that other screens and other electronic media are playing an important role in girls' and boys' lives, but in terms of time spent and content that is produced, TV still dominates. Many studies have been conducted and books written on how watching television, especially extensive television watching, can be associated with a range of problems and deficits. It takes time away from other experiences, can be cognitively overstimulating, is over-commercialized and so on. Children can learn content from television, both information and social scripts, which may encourage certain behavioral patterns (and a tendency towards violence). Television, and its everyday significance for children, is certainly not without troublesome issues.

At the same time, television opens up fantasies, widens perspectives, and forms part of children's work on their identity. Listening to girls and boys talking about their favorite TV characters, explaining what they like especially about them and how they themselves have changed since discovering the character, it also becomes clear that girls and boys use television characters to define themselves. They enjoy the stories and develop with the characters. As adults, we are often astonished and perplexed by the enthusiasm that children develop for TV characters.

Sometimes we regard this enthusiasm benevolently – at other times with disapproval. Even from a perspective with only a minimal awareness of gender, binary worlds become clear. These realms are populated by superheroes and cool losers on the one hand and princesses and models on the other. One universe is characterized by fighting and cool quips, the other by thin, sexy girls in expensive clothes. Knowing that human beings act in an inherently subjectively meaningful way, we quickly arrive at the question: What fascinates girls and boys about these characters? How do they use them in their everyday lives and to construct their identity, and what are the problematic issues, particularly from the point of view of gender equality?

The IZI, the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television, is a department of the German public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting Company). It has the mandate to promote quality in television for children and young adults by means of research. As head of this unique institution, I had the chance to conduct a number of studies with the assistance of a team of wonderful researchers centering on the question,

“What makes a TV character the favorite TV character of a child?” over a ten-year period. The over 20 reception studies presented here focus mainly on children between the ages of 6 and 12. They use various methods of data gathering and evaluation, mainly qualitative but also quantitative. All of the studies build on the same basic theoretical assumption that media reception is a process of active appropriation within everyday contexts. Accordingly, before providing an account of the interplay of the individual studies and an overview of the book’s structure, this book begins with a short summary of the study’s basic theoretical assumptions, the state of current research on gender representation in children’s television, and insights into how boys and girls construct ideas about gender.

1. Theoretical Premise: Media Reception as Active Appropriation

The theoretical premise of this book is that human beings appropriate media actively and in a way that is subjectively meaningful to them. Media usage forms part of everyday routines and rituals, structuring daily schedules, creating opportunities for shared time, and scaffolding communication within families for example. In terms of content, action-oriented reception studies regard media appropriation as a process of selection. Children select certain things from a broad range of available content and interpret media texts in their own particular way. They make use of some of the things offered by media texts they have chosen and interpret these texts through the lens of their everyday lives. The selected and interpreted content can become part of young people’s self-representation, communication, fantasies, worldview and so on. Many scholars have convincingly formulated this theoretical connection, such as David Buckingham, Sonia Livingstone, and Dafna Lemish, and Ben Bachmair and Lothar Mikos with regard to the German discourse, to mention a few. The studies presented in this book are based on the specific concept of media appropriation as the constitution of meaning:

“People

- with the specific themes – both individual and typical for their group and age – which meaningfully guide their actions (‘action-guiding themes’)*
- encounter symbolic material from their culture in specific situations,*
- get their bearings in the particular situational context with the help of this material,*

- *subjectively appropriate the cultural symbolism of the media, especially in childhood, and process it thematically,*
- *and use it to communicate something to themselves or their social environment.”* (Bachmair, 1993, p. 45)

Children use media and constitute meaning with it. By means of open research methods which offer children enough space to articulate their notions and an open-minded evaluation which is able to reconstruct children's points of view it is possible to capture and understand the process of meaning making.

As active as this appropriation is, it also stands in a kind of interrelationship with the cultural material and its own themes. This idea is explicitly linked to the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967), who see cultural appropriation in the interrelation of appropriation and externalization. Human beings have, according to the basic anthropological assumption, the power of objectivation. They are able to condense and objectify experiences, feelings, desires and themes using symbolic and figurative material. Alfred Schütz calls this process “objectification” (Schütz & Luckmann, 1979, p. 317).

Buildings, language, and media are examples of these kinds of objectifications. Every member of society (including children) appropriates available objectifications through experiencing, comprehending and interpreting them, and uses them to structure their everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In line with cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), it is thus possible to prove tendencies in which ideas and scripts from the media can be traced in the thoughts and actions of human beings. In this sense, television can become significant in terms of cultivation, even though the links are far more complex than mere stimulus-response mechanisms. Children construct meaning from the media available and build this meaning into their identities. So what does this mean from a gender-specific perspective?

Children grow up in a society that from the very beginning subjects them to a binary division into girls or boys. They accept this division very early on and construct their self-image and identity accordingly. The media are suppliers of meaning in this process, and they in turn represent images of girls, women, boys, and men to a target audience of girls and boys. Thus a glance at the state of current research on how children's television or television relevant to children constructs gender seems worthwhile.

2. Children's TV Offerings From the Perspective of Media Analysis

Gender Constructions and Presence

Under natural conditions, around 51% of humanity is made up of females and 49% of males. However, this is not reflected in children's television. In the largest media analysis to date worldwide, we examined television programs in 24 countries with the help of international colleagues. The analysis of around 26,500 main characters from everyday fictional children's TV revealed that 68% of all main characters are male, while only 32% are female. This means that there are two male main characters for every female main character (Götz & Lemish, 2012). This basic tendency can also be observed in computer games or cinematic films relevant to children. An analysis of the 101 theatrically released films with the highest US-box-office returns from 1990 to 2005 revealed that only 28% of characters are female. Moreover, female characters are only involved in 17% of scenes. Not only are there markedly more male characters – they are also seen much more frequently (Smith & Cook, 2008).

Gender Constructions and the Representation of Character Traits

In terms of content, characters are given particular traits and patterns of action by their makers. Typical gender trends in this respect are clear. In comparison to male characters, female characters are less active, less loud, less represented in positions of authority and behave more childishly. Male characters act more aggressively, are louder, and are rewarded more often within the plot. They demonstrate more ingenuity, ask more questions, are more frequently presented through their particular abilities and talents, laugh more often, are more insulting and threaten others more frequently. Female cartoon characters show more emotions, are more frequently presented in the context of their relationships to others, are more helpful and more frequently ask for help and protection (Streicher, 1974; Thompson & Zerbios, 1995; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Baker & Raney, 2004 among others). For example, in an analysis of 147 half-hour cartoon TV shows, Catherine Luther and James Robert Legg examined the kinds of aggression exhibited by characters. While approximately 48% of male characters used physical

aggression, only 34% of females did. Forms of social aggression, such as slander, are used much more frequently by female characters than males (30.6% compared to 9.5%) (Luther & Legg, 2010). There are some heroines who are at the center of things, are strong and active, carry out missions, follow their goals self-assertively and have special powers to do so. Some examples include the superheroines in the cartoon series *Kim Possible*, *Totally Spies* and the *Powerpuff Girls*. However, an analysis of 70 cartoon heroes (drawn from 160 hours of programming dating from 2004) also reveals that there are more male than female superheroes and that these female characters are far more often shown as (overly) emotional in their reactions, particularly in critical situations. Heroines are more likely to be superficial and more concerned with their looks than heroes, are more likely to ask questions than use threats, and usually work as a team (88% of all superheroines). Furthermore, twice as many heroines as heroes have a mentor, who is nearly always a man (Baker & Raney, 2007).

Gender Constructions, Narrative, and Action

The cultural construction of the category of gender is not only reflected in numbers, outward appearance and character traits; it is primarily produced by the way the characters are embedded in stories. In one study, the IZI team analyzed the main characters of German children's television in terms of how they were structured in the narration, with particular attention paid to the episode's main conflict. The analysis revealed typical ways of dealing with problems. Some actively deal with the problem and try for example to change the world according to their own needs (egocentric characters). Other active characters tend to mediate when conflict ensues with their partners or friends (communicators), or address conflict proactively but motivated primarily by their sense of responsibility for others (responsible characters). In quite a few series the stories were typically structured that the main characters have to defend themselves and others constantly against external attacks (resistant characters).

Some of them are even buffeted and overwhelmed by the conflicts that they face (clueless characters), or need rescuing from concrete danger (helpless characters).

This study was initially developed from a qualitative analysis of 90 male and female protagonists, and was subsequently applied to a sample of 412 fictional protagonists representative for German children's TV. It became evident that female and male characters were represented in all categories.

However, male characters comprised 80% of the responsible, aimless, and mediating characters, and 70% of the egocentric and defensive characters. There was only a near-equal gender ratio among helpless characters, of which females comprised 44% of all characters (Götz, 2006). Thus, it is mainly male characters who are allowed to prove themselves using active, defining patterns of action.

In a qualitative analysis of theatrical movies, Stacy Smith examined the narrative context of 13 film heroines in highly successful Hollywood films relevant to children between 1937 and 2006, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Princess Diaries*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Mulan* (Smith & Cook, 2008). These films tell the story of heroines who usually have to overcome great trials to save friends and family. Only in a few exceptions are they victims of circumstances (“damsels in distress”), as in the case of *Snow White*. At the same time, nearly all characters were famed for their looks or makeovers aligned with a universally desired beauty as in the case of *The Princess Diaries*. Thus, narratives focus mainly on beauty as the most important and most valued aspect of female personality and on becoming more beautiful as the external symbol of positive development. There is no narrative counterpart to this for boys. Apart from this, the female characters Smith analyzed were driven by a range of typical motivations. They are daydreamers without any clear goals, are led astray or lose their way. There are also the daredevils, who have a relevant goal in mind that drives them on. In nearly all of the films, the female character longs for true love, she experiences love at first sight, love that has to overcome intrigue, or love that is saved through communication. The main focus points of the female roles are always beauty, recognition, and true love (Smith & Cook, 2008). Jeanne Prinsloo comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of narrative constructions in children’s films and shows such as *Winx Club* and *Bratz*. While heroines have adventures and save the world in the main plot strand, the secondary plot strand is usually concerned with their wish to be desired sexually and their longing for a fulfilling relationship with a man (Prinsloo, 2012). In summary, strong female main characters do exist in children’s TV shows. However, there are markedly fewer of them than male characters, and they usually appear as teams. They tend to be the exception to the male norm. The characters are usually constructed as much more emotional, more focused on consumption, less active and less competent. Extant dominant discourse on female images is underpinned and constructed anew. For all the main characters’ strength and agency, their ever-present

main inner motivation is a hypersexualized femininity focused on looks and attractiveness to the opposite sex. Can the same be said of the representation of masculinities?

Gender Constructions and Sexualization

The construction of characters on TV seen by children is not simply a matter of numbers. One feature of TV heroes and heroines visible at first glance is their outer appearance. This includes the color of their hair and skin, their body shape and the way they are presented in clothes. In animated formats, this act of construction is an explicitly artistic process. In live-action formats, it occurs through the purposeful casting of certain actors and actresses in particular roles. While both males and females are sexualized in the media industries (Dotson, 1999), a comparison reveals that female characters are sexualized more frequently and to a markedly greater extent. Smith and Cook found that extreme thinness and provocative, sexy clothing was five times as common in female as in male characters. The percentage of hypersexualized girl and women characters grows even higher in cartoons, especially in regard to the hypersexualization of the body and wasp waists. Women and girl characters were hypersexualized five times as often as boy or men characters. They may no longer play helpless victims, but no matter what attractive role they take on, they are always flawlessly beautiful and always longing for true love (Smith & Cook, 2008). Measuring the bodies of animated girl characters successfully marketed worldwide – for example, calculating the so-called “Waist-to-Hip-Ratio” (WHR) – reveals that nearly every second cartoon girl falls below Barbie’s WHR value (0.6). A corresponding hypersexualization of male characters with an unattainable V-shaped torso only occurs in exceptional cases. Hypersexualized body images form part of the construction of femininity (Götz & Herche, 2012a). This tendency also occurs in other media. Stacy Smith analyzed 4,000 characters in 400 successful children’s and family films and calculated that female characters were hypersexualized five times as frequently as male characters (Smith & Cook, 2008). In her book *Lolita Effect* (2008), Meenakshi Durham identifies five “myths” which the creative media industries proclaim over and over again:

- Sexuality is central to gaining and maintaining love;
- A woman’s erotic attractiveness is based on body features like being slim, small-waisted, long-legged, full-breasted, long-haired, and of European descent (Caucasian);

- Children in infancy are sexually attractive and appealing to adults;
- Violence is sexually stimulating;
- Being desired by males makes girls happy;
- These myths are clearly not age-appropriate or healthy for girls (and boys). (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009)

Staging Masculinity

In scholarship on gender and media more generally (e.g. Gauntlett, 2002; Nayak & Kehily, 2008; Carter & Steiner, 2004), there is a scarcity of work on masculinity or discussions of masculinity in crisis (Connell, 1995; Frosh, 1994; Frosh et al., 2002; Jukes, 1993; Seidler, 1989, 1994; Segal, 1990). Much of it is more theoretical in nature, and is only seldom realized in concrete terms.

From the point of view of communication studies, there are a number of dominant traits of male characters. Boys and men are markedly more common than girls and women, both in television series for children and in children's and family films – and have been so for decades (Smith & Cook, 2008). In the stories told, males are more active, dominant, capable and appear in positions of greater responsibility. They are more aggressive and louder, they laugh, insult and threaten more often, and are more often rewarded for doing so within the plot (cf. Streicher & Bonney, 1974; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Baker & Raney, 2004). Male aggression is mainly physical, while female main characters tend to use social aggression such as slander (Luther & Legg, 2010). In contrast to superheroines, superheroes tend to be more common, more muscular, less emotional, tougher, and more likely to threaten instead of asking questions. While not all male characters in traditional gender roles are stereotypes by any means, superheroes in particular tend to show males as more able to deal with their special powers, master critical situations, and save the world more frequently and on a larger scale (Baker & Raney, 2007).

A qualitative analysis of heroic characters from boys' perspective (Götz, Neubauer & Winter, 2012) revealed typical patterns of action in how characters dealt with challenges, especially for particularly favorite male characters. These characters represent typical forms of symbolization and exaggeration, and thus are constructions of masculinity. The most popular main characters can be divided into two basic character types: the "surmounter type" who stands "above" everyone else and is able to face all challenges (like Batman or Superman), and the "subverter type" (like Bart Simpson) who is able to evade

life's challenges. The "surmounter" type can be divided into the "active hero" and the "strategist" (Götz, Neubauer & Winter, 2012). These types are combined with typical traits and types of physical appearance. The "surmounter" hero as active hero, usually a superhero, corresponds to traditional ideals of dominant masculinity. He is characterized by dominance, possesses toughness and status, is heterosexual, physically able and exceptionally competitive. He distances himself implicitly from groups with a lower status (e.g. homosexuals; cf. Connell, 1995). At the same time, these characters nonetheless still carry devalued forms of masculinity within themselves. Superheroes are often initially social losers but are able to overcome this through a special change in their bodies – such as being bitten by a spider in *Spiderman* – that enables them to escape this devalued status. Other "surmounter types" such as Yugi (*Yu-Gi-Oh!*), Ash (*Pokémon*) or Naruto are strategists. They evolve from a nondescript or devalued form of masculinity to superhero status. They learn rules and how to use strategy in a purposeful manner in competitions, growing with their challenges. The "subverter types" such as Bart or Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*), who are often highly appealing to boys, cultivate the avoidance of authority and redefine being devalued as way of gaining status. These are manifestations of "popular masculinities," as Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2002) state, that are closer to boys' real worlds and forms of expression and position themselves against school-based learning, sportiness, and branded clothing. Thus boy types are, like girls, constructed stereotypically, but the range of physical shapes, character traits, character designs, and narrative constructions are markedly more varied.

3. How Do These Constructions in Children's Television Come About?

The tendencies regarding gender construction in international children's television are clear. TV show stereotypes fall far short of real-life diversity and are in opposition to gender equality, particularly in the case of female characters. If strong girls are shown, then they are add-on characters (Götz, 2014) possessing not only a high level of intelligence, organizational talent, social responsibility and so on, but also a stereotypically beautiful face and bodily proportions unachievable even through cosmetic surgery. While exceptions exist, they are few and far between and tend to appear only on public television channels – thus serving as exceptions that prove the rule.

How can it be that gender constructions remain this binary and stereotypical? There are a wide range of diverse reasons. In the field of children's TV, there is traditional content ("subject matter") that was written at a time with less gender equality, when the (usually male) authors' sensibilities in regard to gender were less honed. In social terms, it is thus always also a question of the individuals shaping the medium. The current international market is clearly influenced by men in senior management positions.

Who Makes Children's Television?

Children's television doesn't just appear out of nowhere – it is the product of human beings. While they work in teams, they also have clearly organized hierarchies. The role of the (male or female) producer is to organize and usually market the overall product. Normally, serial programs have several writers working on them, but there is always one head writer who oversees the scripts. Every episode has a director, who stages the final product based on the script and according to the producers' stipulations. From a gender-specific point of view, the question arises: Who produces children's television, and are production decisions distributed equally among men and women?

Data on the gender ratio behind the scenes of the film and television industry are rare. Stacy Smith and her colleagues analyzed the male-female ratio of the decision-makers behind the 500 most successful films that appeared on the US market between 2007 and 2012 (Smith et al., 2013). This revealed that, on average, for every five men there was only one woman in a comparative managerial position. This ratio has remained stable over the years (Lauzen, 2013). Commercial Hollywood cinema is made primarily by men. The ratio is somewhat better when it comes to film festivals, which include documentaries and lower-budget independent films. Here, women direct up to 22% of films (as compared to 9% of the most successful US films) (Lauzen, 2009). This gender ratio is far removed from the legally proclaimed equality of men and women. Is this different for the children's television industry? Unfortunately, there are hardly any studies to date on gender ratios among the individuals in charge of the central tasks of children's TV production. In a first attempt to address this question, the IZI analyzed the catalogue of MIPJunior, the premiere international marketplace for the buying and selling of children's TV programs. Over 850 programs from over 30 countries are included in the catalog every year. The majority (79.3%) are animated programs, while another 10.3% are live action formats. Online research on the production companies' websites

identified (as much as was possible) whether the positions of producers and head writers and the directors' positions were filled by men or women.

The analysis only included positions that could be verified and clearly categorized according to gender. Among the shows offered at MIPJunior in 2012, it was possible to clearly identify the gender of the producers in 281 shows, that of the directors in 567 shows and that of the head writers in 411 shows. This sample provides at least a small insight into existing gender ratios in children's television. Furthermore, a comparison of the data from the 2010 and 2011 MIPJunior catalogs allows us to observe some trends.

The analysis reveals that the role of children's TV producers lies firmly in the hands of men, who comprise 74% of all producers in the sample. There are 2.8 male producers for every female producer. Between 2011 and 2012, changes in the gender ratio among producers were only minimal. Europe had the lowest ratio of female producers with 17%.

Among script writers, we find over three quarters of head writers are male (76.6%) compared to just under a quarter of female head authors (23.4%).

The dominance of men in this position is strongest in Europe, where women only comprise 20% of all children's TV producers.

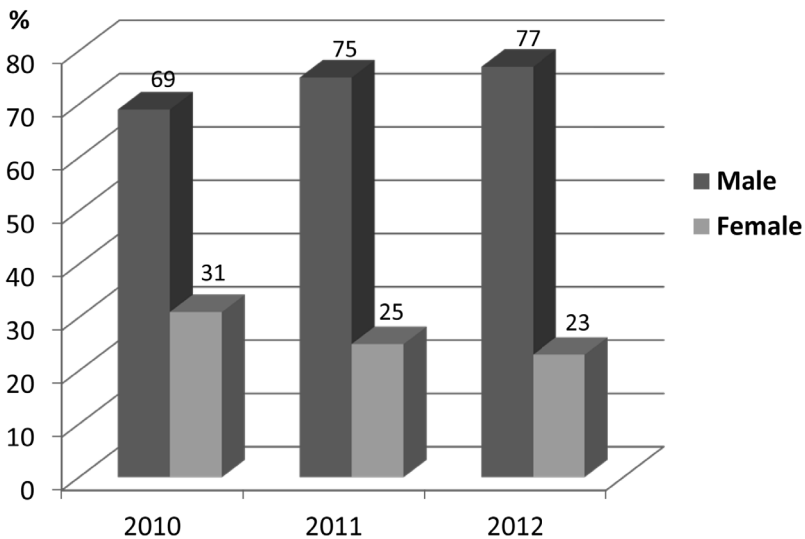


Image 1: Head writers of children's TV productions 2010, 2011, 2012: Data in %, 2010: n = 473, 2011: n = 418, 2012: n = 411

The situation in Latin America is somewhat better, with two male head writers for every one female head writer. In 2012, only Australia had an equal ratio of male and female head writers among the shows offered in 2012. The annual comparison reveals a steady decrease in the number of female head writers between 2010 and 2012. In 2010 there were two male head writers for every female head writer (cf. Image 1). Directing is the area most strongly dominated by men, as 88% of all directors of the children's TV programs in the sample are male (cf. Image 2). This predominance has even increased slightly between 2011 and 2012. Male director predominance is strongest in Asia (95%), followed by Europe and North America (around 87% each). The greatest number of female directors is found in South America, where at least a third of children's TV shows in the sample are staged by women. The field of animation is particularly dominated by male directors (89%) as are feature films (85%). Only the small category of educational TV shows reveals a predominance of women as directors. In comparison to male producers, female producers hire more frequently female head writers and female directors. The overall picture is clear: men create children's television. They have the power to produce, write and stage the stories and images offered to children across the globe to create their self-images and world perspectives.

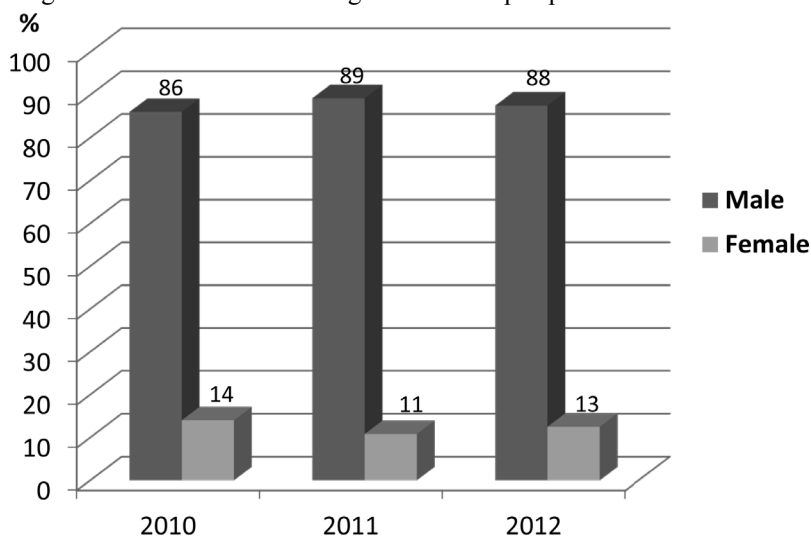


Image 2: Directors of children's TV productions 2010, 2011, 2012: Data in %, 2010: n=473, 2011: n=516, 2012: n=567

Across all major decision-making positions in the production of internationally marketed children's TV shows, there is a gender ratio of 80.9% men to 19.1% women. We still have a long way to go towards gender equality. It has been proven for the field of film that when women are in decision-making positions, more women are shown on screen and hypersexualization is reduced (Smith et al., 2013). Corresponding studies for children's media are still lacking. Of course, just because women are in positions of responsibility does not mean that they use their power to promote gender equality. Reality is certainly much more complex. However, considering the equality of men and women proclaimed by law, the purely statistical analysis of major production roles in children's TV suggests that women are at a systematic disadvantage in the industry that calls for political action. Positions of responsibility in the production process are disproportionately staffed with men. The field of film reveals an even more unbalanced picture. Of 1,565 creators of family films theatrically released in US and Canadian cinemas between 2006 and 2009 (and later on children's television across the globe), 93% of directors, 87% of writers and 80% of producers were men (Smith & Choueiti, 2011). As it stands, men control popular images of girls and women, their stories, their perceptions and their ideals of the opposite sex. These representations are then passed on to children of all genders. This power imbalance has consequences for TV content. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, women are frequently constructed as "the Other." They are deviations from the norm, which naturally is male. Thus they appear much less frequently and mainly in roles that are "not masculine" (De Beauvoir, 1968). Take the classic example of the beloved 1980s cartoon, *The Smurfs*. Created by a man (and later turned into a series led by four men), the male smurf is the norm, from which the exception – the sexy Smurfette – then deviates. This is not necessarily meant to be denigrating; the intention can be appreciative and admiring in the sense of showing an ideal, which is then often hypersexualized. Laura Mulvey summarized this in her formulation of the triple "male gaze" (1975). The director, usually a man, stages the characters; the (male) cinematographer chooses the perspective and framing; and the (usually male) protagonist at the center of the plot gazes at the female characters and thus triply makes them the object of male desire (Mulvey, 1975). This observation, based on the first decades of Hollywood movies in the twentieth century, to a certain extent also applies to children's television of today. The intention behind attributing value to the attractiveness to the opposite gender is not necessarily a denigrating one. They are merely creative,

objectified fantasies of a particular dominant perspective – one shaped by men and by their experience of growing up as boys. Accordingly, constructions of femininity usually are an “outside view,” that is, they are usually not based on the experience of being perceived as a girl or woman by others and of building and maintaining one’s self-image as a girl or woman.

Accordingly, supporting greater diversity in production would be incredibly important here (Götz & Schlote, 2010). At the same time – and this needs to be noted too – there are quite a number of women working in children’s TV besides producers, writers, and directors. In the offices of the major international children’s TV channels that buy or commission programs, the number of permanently employed women clearly exceeds that of men. In German public service TV there are an estimated 2.7 female executive editors for every male executive editor.

The category of gender is not binary or immutably linked to sex. The way each person in the children’s TV industry grew up and their own constructions of gender shape their role in the creative process. Some research delves into how international television producers of quality children’s programs understand gender, asking them to explain aspects of their gender construction and the aims they have for children’s television in this regard. Based on 135 interviews with television producers from 65 countries, Dafna Lemish (2010) categorizes the extent to which gender awareness is developed in individual television producers into developmental stages:

1. Pre-feminist awareness: Assumes that girls and boys are treated equally and takes this treatment for granted.
2. Numerical equality: Awareness of a certain imbalance in terms of numbers and a desire to change this.
3. Role reversal: A recognition that certain gender role stereotypes in children’s television exist and an attempt to extend these (e.g. girls as main characters in action series and boys as main characters in series about problems between people).
4. Different but equal: Knowledge of gender-specific tendencies within socialization and the desire to treat both sexes equally in their differences.
5. Post-feminist approach: Based on the assumption that equality has already been achieved, boys are purposely focused on as the disadvantaged gender.

Diversity certainly exists, but unfortunately it does not mean that gender awareness is translated into practical strategies for buying programs or production decisions. Overall, children's television and television relevant to children's lives is clearly shaped by stereotypical representations of gender. What do we know about how girls and boys deal with these images and stories?

4. The State of Research on How Girls and Boys Deal With Stereotypical Representations of Gender

Media is an important maybe even dominant agent of socialization in children's lives (Lemish, 2006), though it is difficult to identify the contribution TV makes to children's development of inner pictures of gender and gender roles besides other socialization agents like parents and school etc. (Lemish, 2010). What can be shown are empirical phenomena. When children ages four to nine retell the content of cartoons, boys talk nearly exclusively about boy characters. They describe the male protagonists as active and aggressive. They also hardly ever refer to the relationship of boy characters to girl characters, perceiving their relationship to the opposite sex as unimportant. When talking about girl characters, boys also mention the relationship that the girl has or desires to have with the boy character, clearly focusing on the boy's perspective. In doing so, they adopt gender stereotypes, as seen in the following quotes: *"Girls follow what the boys say," "Girls always say they're pretty," "Girls are teased by the boys" or "Girls aren't adventurous"* (Thompson & Zerbino, 1997, p. 428). If girls talk about the same characters, they also describe the boys as active and aggressive, but also talk about their relationships with the show's girl characters. They regard the boys critically, for example in regard to their self-image (*"Boys think that they're the smartest"*) or the consequences that the boy characters' behavior has for the girls (*"Boys they tease them, they laugh at them"*). Thus girls both narrate from the story's dominant perspective and simultaneously see the show from the devalued perspective of the girl characters, who they describe in line with the stereotypical representations offered as "domestic," "play with dolls," and "polite" (ibid.). When children retell knowledge shows and documentaries, they focus on traditionally more masculine behavior (analytic thought, autonomous action), while traditionally more feminine ascriptions (shy, warm, friendly, social) are hardly mentioned at all. Girls are more flexible in appropriating the traditional aspects of hierarchical superiority, while boys rarely adopt traditional aspects of less hierarchical