Babeş–Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences

Representation of tale heroes in
primary school aged children's everyday lives

SUMMARY

Supervisor   PhD-candidate

Prof. Cseke Péter PhD.   **Kassay Réka**

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Contents

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I. INTRODUCTION

The PhD Thesis focuses on the process of how children's favourite tale heroes become part of the different segments of their everyday lives. These emblematic characters are mostly cartoon heroes, so the research belongs to the field of audience research of audio-visual media, though it is not limited strictly to the animated films.

The relationship between children and the audio-visual media is usually analysed through a psychological approach, investigating the effect of media on children, while the user-based examinations with a sociological approach are more frequent in the case of adults. However, the changing media environment requires new approaches. The present study examines the hero representations based on children's social background, also paying attention to the factors related to the content and the media industry.

Scientific paradigms

Tale heroes appear in children's lives in very different ways. To draw any conclusion from these, it is necessary to group somehow these appearances. In the present case the representations of the heroes took the shape of two main categories. From one hand, it is remarkable that the commercial representations of the characters become part of children's lives: children talk about them, perceive the messages transmitted by these, they even use them as role models. From the other hand, children often give new form to their favourites, using their own patterns: they draw the characters, they play their role or they embody them during any other creative activities. The two main groups of the different roles lead to the two major paradigms of media research: media effects theory approaches the examined processes mainly from the "*What do media do with the audience?*" question, and presumes a significant and direct influence of media. In turn, research on media consumption starts from the "*What do the audience do with media*?" question, allowing for a limited influence of media messages. The former focuses on content, trying to deduce conclusions from it regarding the audience; the latter examines different interpretations taking into account the social embeddedness of consumers. Considering these theories, I applied both the approach of audience research and the approach of text-based research as for the summary of the literature, as for my own survey.

II. SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

1. The approach of audience research

This chapter sums up those surveys, which try to investigate the role of audio-visual media in children's lives, starting from the empirical examination of the audience. In order to map this, first I reviewed the surveys on children's media usage. There are insufficient data referring to the target group and the age group of my research, so I took into account the most general international tendencies that can be a basis for smaller, local studies as well.

The next, very controversial issue is the effect of media on children. This is a very popular topic in everyday discourses, but the word "effect" suggests a unidirectional relationship, so I rather discuss the role of media in children's lives. The outlook to media effect theories demonstrates in how many different ways theorists tried to model the effect of media on the audience, though we have several theories, but few trustworthy data about this topic. While in the case of adults the sociological approach is prevailing, in the case of children the effect on personal development is more accentuated. Therefore, findings are a bit different as well, suggesting that the media has a more significant and direct effect on children. Furthermore, most of the studies investigate the negative factors, so the outcomes suggest that the effect of media is rather negative than positive. Due to the changing media environment the question requires new approaches, therefore I find important to place the topic of tale heroes in a larger context of media theories.

What concerns the audience research of cartoons and tale characters, a remarkable difference can be observed between the point of view of children and parents. The adults categorize tales as "good" or "bad" products, while children differentiate them as contents for girls or boys. Among the surveys focusing on children I took into account both the research of role models and the research of heroes, separating the quantitative and the more experimental qualitative approaches. The points of view of the parents are shown mostly by qualitative surveys – from these I highlighted the economical approach: research that investigates the effect of tale heroes on the families' shopping habits.

2. The text-based approach

In this chapter I reviewed all those approaches that do not start from the point of view of the audience. Therefore this part of the thesis includes not only the literature that refers to the analysis of the content, but also to the processes of production and distribution. I took into account previous research done on different fields (starting from literature and film theories to economical and psychological approach of the content analysis) and applying different methods as well.

The summary starts with the texts referring to the evolution of audio-visual media content for children. Furthermore, I presented the differences between the Romanian and Hungarian tradition of animated films: while in Romania we cannot talk about a cartoon industry, Hungary has a rich cartoon tradition with a great impact on today's cartoon consumption. In the case of Hungarians from Romania this shows a difference between the different segments of the community.

The content analysis of audio-visual production for children is often effectuated by the media regulatory bodies: while numerous studies about cartoons and other TV-productions are available, there are only a few documents about online platforms. The regulation of online content is also less elaborated compared to other types of classic media. Corresponding to the integrated media communication of the present, some texts focus on the intermedial processes: among others, the merchandising strategy is an important issue in the case of products for children. The success of this strategy is explained by the examples of its first appearance. Since the '30-s, the merchandising processes resulted significant changes in the communication and the culture of consumption as well. Theorists have different opinion about this phenomenon: some of them predict changes in the playing habits of children, the loosing of creativity due to the ready-made toys that represent cartoon characters. There are optimistic views as well: in this opinion the products of the merchandising industry does not necessarily affect children's psychic well-being, moreover, it can have beneficial effects as well.

The main character of the productions stands in the centre of the cross-media processes, so different analyses try to investigate what are the characteristics of a popular tale hero. This depends on the context as well: the emblematic characters and the tale heroes that become role models (these two are often connected) always reflect the values of the audience. This relation is due to the identification of the viewers, which originates from the identification that is part of the socialization processes in childhood. The psychology of tales explains the role of identification with fictive characters, while the audio-visual format offers a complex inducement, stimulating more intensely the process of

identification. Theorists identified different types of viewer identification, these can be discovered in all the tales in different proportion. In addition to this, the contribution of the audience is necessary for a character to overstep its context and to become a complex personality. Several examples are given to this in the Hungarian and international literature of the topic – in the Hungarian culture the figure of Tévémaci (Tv-teddy) is one of the most representative cases.

III. PARAMETERS OF THE RESEARCH

The inquiry was effectuated in parallel in an urban and a rural environment: in primary school classes from Cluj-Napoca and from Săvădisla. The choice for the age group is grounded by psychological factors. What concerns the analysed media, all devices of media communication that become a context of a hero are taken into account, but the accent is on the audio-visual media. The research uses an interdisciplinary approach: the psychological and economical processes, the approach of literature and film theory are all part of the reached fields, but the main accent is on the sociological analysis.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Who are the favourite tale characters of children and what influences the hero-preference?
2. In what forms do these characters appear in children's lives?
3. What kind of attitudes do viewers manifest towards these hero representations?

V. RESEARCH METHODS

The research covers very different fields of media research, of film studies that origin from literature theories, of psychology and sociology. Therefore I chose a qualitative approach that permits more dynamism in the combination of different methods – in the qualitative tradition the methods are not strictly defined, they are rather subjected to the aims of the research. I took advantage of this, using the methods of different disciplines, or sometimes using personalized methods. The first part of the chapter contains the argumentation of the chosen methods, from different points of view: as mentioned before, the topic of the research requested a qualitative approach, but the initial methods were

completed by new ones in order to answer the research questions. In the first part of the data collection I applied non-structured interviews and group activities, afterwards I made structured in-depth interviews with the children, their parents and educators. I completed the data collection with a participant observation to check my findings. During data analysis I applied statistics to the structured data, because this way I could point out significant relations between different factors. Finally, I concluded case studies, completing the above mentioned audience research methods with the semiotic analysis of the content.

Since I did not meet any other similar approach of this topic, the methodology had to be elaborated as well, combining different methods of previous research that touched upon this topic in any other way. The factors and categories that shaped my analysis can be considered a part of the outcomes, but I specified these in the methodological chapter, because they are all part of a process during which I tried to find the answers to my research questions.

During all stages of the work I respected the principles of research ethics: I asked the permission of the school directors, educators, parents and leaders of the *Életfa Association* to use the children's personal data in anonymous way.

VI.RESULTS BASED ON THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this chapter I returned to my research questions in detail, in order to find the answers from the analyses of the data.

First, I presented the factors referring to the audience and the factors referring to the content. Afterwards I presented the 10 most popular characters. Here I also reflected to the factors that describe a specific hero's audience. In most cases the most beloved heroes are strongly mediated characters of modern tales, but the children's domicile and gender is also significant in the hero preference. Some other factors related to the children's background (like education of the parents or the physical environment) are occasionally significant from this point of view. In the case of the most popular heroes it is remarkable that most of them are strongly connected to some forms of children's toys and plays: the *Barbie* series origin from the Barbie doll, the *Star Wars*-edition of LEGO is organic part of the cult that surrounds the series, while there are many toys representing the main characters from *Winnie, the Pooh*, that can be found as plush animals on the shelves of the toyshops.

Afterwards I presented the factors influencing hero preference deduced from statistical tests. These outlined a multi-staged model, in which the characteristics of the hero and of the tale, the distribution process, and as a second filter, the factors that describe the audience are all significant to which heroes appear in children's everyday lives.

In the second part of the chapter I described the main forms of appearance of the characters. Most of the representations (45,9%) are connected to the different segments of real life: among others, the role model, the imaginary friend, the different activities or the parallel between tale and reality belong to this group. 24,3% of the representations belong to the different forms of play: for instance, playing the role of a hero, playing with toys that represent tale characters, or playing computer games. The passive appearances – when a character becomes part of a child's life only on the screen – represent 29,8%. Some trends were also observable here, although the representation forms were too various to analyse them statistically. It is yet remarkable, that the realistic characters were more frequent as role models or parallels between tale and reality, while the heroes of fairy tales appeared more prevalent in different forms of children's play. The play was also connected more to the story-centric characters, while the emblematic ones appeared more often on commercial products. However, trends like these need more detailed, case study analysis.

In the third part of the chapter I presented those factors that influence the viewers' attitude towards hero representations. I explained in detail in the chapter discussing research questions the representation types based on David Morley's decoding categories. Here I was looking for significant relation between the identifying, modifying and passive attitudes and the factors presented in the first part of the chapter (the characteristics of children and the characteristics of the heroes). According to the statistics, the characteristics of the hero and the type of the tale, but the medium and the distribution are also significant regarding the viewers' attitude, while some factors related to the family (education of parents, number of brothers and sisters, media literacy) also influence the viewers' attitude. Like in the first part, we can also talk about a multi-staged model, where the factors related to the audience represent the first filter, but the second filter – the factors related to the audience – is also very important. This can be connected to some of the models presented in the theoretical part, but as the media communication environment is radically changing, there is a need for new models and new approaches that assign more importance to the activity of the audience.

VII. COMPLEMENTARY RESULTS: CASE STUDIES

The goal of the case studies was to examine in detail the cult of the two most popular characters among girls and boys. Both characters are strongly connected with the play and both evoke discussion among the parents. In the case of Barbie parents are worrying about the values that the characters transmit to their children, while in the case of *Star Wars* parents have different opinions about the invasion of commercial products related to the characters.

During the analysis I applied semiotic methods to examine the content, and I find that both productions are strongly connected to the traditional fairy tales, regarding the narration and the characters as well. Yet both can be considered "modern tales" because of the details of the story and the graphic style. Those who don't know profoundly these series, form their opinion based on these last, very obvious aspects, therefore the moral panic referring to the productions is a little bit exaggerated.

Throughout the case studies I analysed both the productions and the children's interpretation, searching for answer to some questions that are related to my research questions but specific to the respective phenomenon. In both cases I paid specific attention to the effects of the community, because these are more complicated to analyse statistically.

VIII. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

After the summary of the literature, the methodology and the main findings, at the end of this chapter I reflected upon the relevance of the study and the objectives regarding the use of the results, respectively the possibility of continuation. I find the representation of the heroes an important topic, because it is very specific to the intermedial communication, when a certain content gets a new form and a new signification during the contact with the user. The present research doesn't focus on these media processes, because I was more interested in the interpretation of children, but this could be a possible way to continue.

What concerns the present outcomes, the importance of the factors related to family (especially media literacy) show that it would be worthy to care for the development of the media culture, for the communication with children on the content. The information of the parents is also important in order to find a common tone with the next generation. Furthermore, hopefully the results will contribute to those people's work, who take decisions about productions for children. Especially as everybody agrees

that this is a very important issue: new media and new technology offer a good opportunity to approach the young viewers and consumers in an entertaining way, while also using these in teaching and education, in the shaping of their personality or in the transmittance of the cultural heritage.

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