

# **Barbie or Star Wars?**

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

The book 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.

The representations of the heroes take the shape of two main categories. On one hand, it is remarkable that the representations of the characters become part of children's lives as products of the merchandising industry, as toys or role models. On the other hand, children often give new form to their favourites by drawing them or embodying them during playing, using their own patterns. 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 background of

consumers. Considering these theories, the summary of the literature contains two main chapters: the first sums up studies that investigate the role of audio-visual media in children's lives, including empirical examination of the audience, while the second presents those surveys, which refer to the analysis of the content, the processes of production and distribution.

The main questions of the study are the following: Who are the favourite tale characters of children and what influences the hero-preference? In what forms do these characters appear in children's lives? What kind of attitudes do viewers manifest towards these hero representations?

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. 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. The research is based on qualitative methods: in-depth interviews made with children, parents and teachers, as well as group activities of drawing and projection. These are completed by a statistical analyses of the hero representations and two case studies.

According to the outcomes of the research, the majority of 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.

Regarding 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%. Although the representation forms are too various to analyse them statistically, different tendencies can be observed regarding the forms of the appearances. For example, the realistic characters are more frequent as role models or parallels between tale and reality, while the heroes of fairy tales appear more prevalent in different forms of children's play. The play is also connected more to the story-centric characters, while the emblematic ones appear more often on commercial products.

The viewers' attitude towards hero representations are framed in identifying, modifying and passive attitudes, based on David Morley's decoding categories. According to the statistics, the characteristics of the hero and the type of the tale, the medium and the distribution influence most strongly the viewers' attitude, while some factors related to the family (education of parents, number of brothers and sisters, media literacy) are also significant from this point of view. We can talk about a multi-staged model, where the factors related to the content 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 discussed in the first chapter, but as the media communication environment is radically changing, new models are needed that assign more importance to the activity of the audience.

The research is completed with two case studies: one about Barbie, the favourite cartoon character of the girls, and one about Star Wars, the most popular content among the boys.

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The results of the investigation will hopefully 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.