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The World Belongs to the Young: Representation of Socialization Agents in Early Childhood Television Content

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Based on cultivation theory, this study addresses television content as a core contributor to socialization processes in early childhood. The study involved an in-depth thematic analysis of early childhood socialization agents on television channels targeting young children. The analysis revealed young viewers are presented with a world saturated by supportive friendships but few and weak representations of adults. Friends dominate the boundary-free imaginary world at the center of televised narratives. Adults are often delegated to the plots' margins and are rarely presented as authority figures. Implications are discussed in light of the child viewers' developmental characteristics.

Keywords: Cultivation Theory; Socialization; Television; Thematic Analysis

Television is an important socialization agent for young viewers and a presenter of *other* socialization agents, including parents and peers; it is a source from which viewers learn about the people in their environment, their values and norms (e.g., Lemish, 2007). Television viewing remains the pastime activity to which children ages 3–16 years old worldwide devote the greatest amount of time (Kids Tech Consumer Market Research, 2018). Even infants younger than one year of age spend nearly an hour watching television content on traditional and mobile screens daily (Kabali et al., 2015). Until adolescence, children tend to watch content specifically created for them and broadcast on child-dedicated channels (Te'eni-Harari & Yadin, 2014). The goal of this study is to conduct an in-depth examination of the representations of early childhood socialization agents in television programs targeting young children. The study's contributions are three-fold. First, it examines

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content specifically targeting young children. Second, it analyzes multiple socialization agents concurrently, both adult and young. Third, it employs an in-depth thematic analysis of representations, complementing past quantitative research on individual socialization agents (e.g., Robinson & Anderson, 2006).

Television and Early Childhood Socialization

Socialization is a long-term and "constant social experience through which we develop our embodied human potential and learn the patterns of our culture" (Macionis, 1999, p. 120). The televised representation of people, their characteristics and interactions, is important to examine as the representations likely play a role in shaping children's socialization. Producers of children's television worldwide claim to adhere to principles of healthy representations of socialization agents in the shows' content, recognizing its role in children's socialization (Lemish, 2010).

Cultivation theory links socialization processes with media exposure as "television offers a continual flow of stories … that serve to define the world and legitimize a particular social order" (Morgan et al., 2014, p. 480). Through its vivid and entertaining narratives, which reflect underlying cultural values, television shapes viewers' views of social reality, behaviors, and the norms associated with them (Hendriyani et al., 2016). The patterns of representations of socializing agents that are prevalent and repeated within television content create an enabling context for developing lasting cognitive schemas (Ditsworth, 2001). These schemas can guide children's future expectations, social norm perceptions, story-telling skills, and interaction patterns as seen on these shows (e.g., Belton, 2001).

Early Childhood Socialization Agents

Adult Agents of Socialization

During the early years, adult socialization agents – especially parents – are important in children's lives (Berk, 2005). Parents expose children to the world and teach them language, social values, and cultural morals; parents influence children's psychological development and early attachment, which determine their relationships throughout life (Berk, 2005). Lemish (2011) found that 71% of children's programs broadcast in Israel, mostly those targeted at kindergarten aged children, included only limited representations of parents. Parent-child relations on United States television up to the 2000s largely followed traditional patterns: mothers were responsible for the televised family's emotional well-being, fathers were in charge of decision-making and discipline, and children were depicted as obedient to parental authority (Douglas, 2001).

Aside from parents, grandparents are important socialization agents for young children. The Wizo Organization (2012) reported a high level of involvement of Israeli grandparents in their grandchildren's daily lives. Grandparents' role is largely perceived as positive for their grandchildren and supportive of the parents (Drew

et al., 1998). Conversely, studies have found a small, limited, and at times negative representation of grandparents in children's media content (e.g., Lemish, 2011).

With young children spending long hours in educational settings, educators also have a significant influential potential as "structures of social organization and community" outside of the family unit (Godfrey & Holmes, 2016, p. 73). Only a few studies have examined the representation of educational characters in media content (e.g., Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Turin (2014) identified changes in their representation in Israeli media over the years, shifting from mostly male to female teachers and from admired social leaders to ridiculed and ignorant characters.

Young Agents of Socialization

The peer group is a central socialization agent for children. Friends provide the needed cognitive and social assistance for learning processes and development (Crosnoe, 2000). Friendships are connected with significant values such as support, loyalty, intimacy, and pro-social and normative behaviors (Crosnoe, 2000). Siblings are also significant socialization agents for young children, due to the many hours spent together and shared closeness. Sibling relationships usually are characterized by warmth and love, along with jealousy, competitiveness, and conflict (Buist et al., 2013). Greater closeness and warmth between siblings was found to be related to less conflict and fewer development problems (Buist et al., 2013). Recent research on televised sibling representation is lacking. Larson (2001) found that the small majority of sibling interactions on United States sitcoms from 1940–1990 was positive, but many important functions in sibling relationships (e.g., their joint ties with their parents) were under-represented.

Research Questions

To provide a comprehensive, in-depth picture of the representation of socialization agents in television shows targeting young children, socialization agents were examined as presented in the narratives, including their characteristics, interactions, and roles, consistent with cultivation studies (e.g., Lien et al., 2009). The following research questions were examined:

> RQ$_1$: Through what themes are adult socialization agents (parents, grandparents, and teachers) represented in early childhood television programs?
>
> RQ$_2$: Through what themes are young socialization agents (friends and siblings) represented in early childhood television programs?

Method

Sample

The current study is part of a larger project (full details available from authors). The study analyzed content from eight Israeli television channels (Baby, Luli, Hop,

Disney Junior, Nick Junior, Junior, JimJam, and the Israeli Educational Television) that included young children (birth to 6 years of age) in their target audience. These channels were the entire population of television channels relevant for the study's target audience. The analyzed content within these channels was randomly sampled to be representative of the broadcast schedule over a period of one month (January 2017). Eight hours of content were analyzed from each channel, creating a composite week sample of two afternoons from 4pm to 7pm and one Saturday morning (the Israeli weekend) between 8am to 10am. Israeli Educational Television, which has a wider audience age range, was sampled between 1pm and 4pm, hours that tend to focus more on the study's target audience. Overall, 330 shows were sampled alongside transitional segments. Detailed information about the sample and its generalizability to other countries can be found in the supplemental materials.

Quantitative Coding of Socializing Agents

Five undergraduate students underwent training to code the presence of socialization agents. Upon demonstrating good intercoder agreement, the shows were randomly divided among the coders for analysis. One randomly selected hour from each channel was used to demonstrate intercoder reliability at set interludes along the coding process ($n = 41$ shows). Each reliability test included three to five coders in diverse compositions. Scott's π, which tests agreement above and beyond chance, was used to assess intercoder reliability (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Scores across all tests were averaged to form an overall reliability score, which was very good for all agents (.86–1.00). Coders identified up to four main characters in each program (i.e., characters who had a significant part in the plot), resulting in 972 main characters; of these, 813 were clearly coded as one of the examined socialization agents.

Thematic and Structural Analysis

Thematic and structural analyses were performed by the three authors to analyze the large quantity of systematically-gathered data. Thematic analysis inductively creates conceptual groupings from the data by detecting recurring patterns (Riessman, 2005). Its emphasis is on the content of a text; in other words, focus was on, "what" is was said more than "how" it is was said. Structural analysis completes this void by emphasizing shifts in the way a story is was told. The analysis was performed by detecting the significant socializing agents recognized by past research (e.g., Lemish, 2011) and theory. Then, the portrayals of socialization agents were examined for their characteristics, behaviors, interaction with other characters, and roles in the plot; this examination was complemented with an open consideration of new concepts that emerged from the data (Joffe, 2012). The three authors each took careful notes and revisited the content several times to ascertain that all important details were identified and considered, including technical codes and the messages

behind them (Fiske, 1987). In group discussions, each author presented the main themes they identified individually as recurring and significant patterns in the programs; from these discussions, the most significant themes were selected for which there was agreement that they best express the subject. This analysis revealed overt and salient repeated patterns of meaning within the narrative and structural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

A Tale of Two Worlds: The Real and Imaginary

The analysis revealed that the structure of many show narratives involved a distinction between a real world and an imaginary world. In many shows, the characters' real world was used to frame the plot – in the opening and closing of the program – whereas most of the plot took place in an imaginary world. The transition between the real and the imaginary worlds was a central narrative device; the two were separated by technical and content-related means (e.g., often, the imaginary world was used to solve a real-world problem shown at the start of the episode). The two worlds were distinct in the characters they involved: the imaginary world was largely defined by the absence of adults and the dominance of friends. Parents were present more often in the real world.

An example of the real-imaginary worlds distinction in the plots can be seen in the show *Kate and Mim-Mim* (Disney Junior). Kate, a four-year-old girl, along with her bunny doll, Mim-Mim, were seen in the opening frame of the plot in their realistic home along with Kate's parents. A certain accessory (e.g., a cardboard box) or situation led Kate and Mim-Mim to leave reality to enter an imaginary world. There, the two met their friends, and they solved problems together. Additional series from the sample that exemplified this theme (and all themes below) can be found in Table 1.

The Complexity of Parental Representation

Parents were quantitatively rare in television shows for early childhood ($n = 42$, 4.32% of main characters). The thematic analysis revealed three main themes within parental representation: (a) marginal characters that appear in the narrative frame in an insignificant role, (b) a significant part of the characters' daily reality, in an authoritative and educational role, and (c) unauthoritative and childish yet significant counterparts to the children in the main plot.

In the first theme, parents' presence in early childhood programs was a marker differentiating the children's imaginary world from their reality. Parents were not present in the main plot of the program that took place in an imaginary world, and the child characters encountered the parents only before entering that world and upon exiting it. For example, the narrative in the series *Dan and Muesli* (Israeli Educational Television) linked a real-world problem with its solution in the

Table 1 Additional Examples of Sample Shows in Which Episodes Exemplified the Identified Themes in the Study

Theme	Show Title	Channel
A tale of two worlds: The real and the imaginary	Doc McStuffins	Disney Junior
	Mia and Me	Junior
	PJ Masks	Disney Junior
Parental representation: Parents as marginal characters that appear in the narrative frame in an insignificant role	Alisa Knows What to Do!	Junior
	Doc McStuffins	Disney Junior
	Fireman Sam	Hop
	Harry and His Bucket Full of Dinosaurs	JimJam
	Kate and Mim-Mim	Disney Junior
	Pingu	JimJam
	Playing with Benny	Luli
	Sendokai Champions	Junior
	The World of Peter Rabbit and Friends	Hop
Parental representation: Parents as a significant part of the characters' daily reality, in an authoritative, educational, and supportive role	Bing	Luli
	Daniel Tiger	Luli
	Keshet's (Rainbow's) Colors	Luli
	Moriya-ya	Luli
	Pizi Discovers	Luli
Parental representation: Parents as unauthoritative and childish significant counterparts to their children in the main plot	Detective Tamar and Captain Tuesday	Nick Junior
	Gingi (Redhead)	Junior
	Kofiko	Junior
The counter-stereotypical grandparent	Detective Tamar and Captain Tuesday	Nick Junior
	Grandpa Joe's Magical Playground	Baby
The clueless teacher versus the rare mentor	Cookie's Crumby Pictures	Hop
	Mia and Me	Junior
	PJ Masks	Disney Junior

(*Continued*)

Table 1 (Continued)

Theme	Show Title	Channel
The empowering peer group	*Care Bears and Cousins*	Hop
	Elena of Avalor	Disney Junior
	Katani (Little One)	Baby
	Nature Cat	Hop
	Paw Patrol	Nick Junior
	Super Wings	Hop
	Talking Tom and Friends The Little Band	Junior
	Tipa Tupa	Baby
	The Little Orchestra	Baby
The inconsistent representation of siblings	*Billy Bam Bam*	Baby
	The Magical Park	Baby
	Uncle Haim's Crazy World	Hop

imaginary world. In an episode entitled "Angry Wind," Dan-Dan shared with his father a problem – he exaggerated his cookie-eating abilities to his friends. Then, Dan Dan and his doll Muesli entered an imaginary world in which another fictional character learned the hard way that one should not boast about accomplishments they cannot easily achieve. At the end of the episode, Dan-Dan returned to his real room, called his father, and implemented the lesson learned in the imaginary world.

Parents as traditional authority figures were present throughout the entire plot of shows. For example, in the program *Ronny the Racoon* (Luli), Ronny's parents were seen throughout each episode as they prepared and ate dinner together, taught Ronny about the food he was eating, and rewarded Ronny for his good behavior.

In contrast, some parents in early childhood programs were portrayed as lacking in authority, lenient with regard to setting rules, overly indulgent, and even childish. In these narratives, parents were shown as weak, unresourceful, and sometimes clueless as to their defiant children's actions. At times, the parents served as sidekicks for their children's shenanigans. For example, in the show *Little Charmers* (Nick Junior), in an episode entitled "A Charming Campout," the young magicians' father took the girls on a camping trip in which he guided them on how to overcome obstacles without using magic. Throughout the episode, the charmers did not adhere to the father's instructions and used magic to easily complete the tasks. Along the way, the father seemed defeated and shamed before finally composing himself and brought them home.

The Counter-Stereotypical Grandparents

The study identified only 17 main characters as grandparents (1.75%). But in these rare portrayals, grandparents were wise and lively, challenging the traditional television stereotypes of sickness, complaints, and boredom (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). In the current sample, grandparents were significant figures for the child characters: They played with them and helpfully shared their knowledge and life experiences. For example, the series *Animal Party* (Baby) focused on a curious monkey, JoJo, and his grandmother who taught him about his forest surrounding as she entertained him with riddles and games. JoJo's grandmother was active, vital, and playful. Throughout the episodes, other forest animals gathered and joined the grandmother's riddle games. Thus, JoJo's grandmother became the center of the plot and attracted all the animals in the forest.

The Clueless Teacher versus the Rare Mentor

Despite being significant socialization agents in early childhood, only a handful of teacher characters were depicted in the sample (*n* = 6, 0.62%). They were largely defined by their cluelessness toward their surroundings. An example of a teacher character who was emaciated from their significant educator and authoritative role can be seen in the show *Hey Duggie* (Luli). Duggie the dog was a loveable camp counselor for other young animals. Yet, Duggie never spoke. Rather, a narrator voice-over accompanied the show, asking Duggie leading questions, guiding his actions, and explaining Duggie's actions to the viewers.

A rare example of an educator who was a positive mentor was found in the show *Sendokai Champions* (Junior). Here, an old Asian master tasked four children with the mission of saving the world by winning a soccer match against aggressive aliens. The master taught the children to cooperate as a team by using their inner powers and armored suites. The master was a warrior, the tribe's leader, knowledgeable and experienced, thus garnering respect.

The Empowering Peer Group

As noted, the main plot in many programs took place in an imaginary world characterized by a large presence of peers (*n* = 706 main characters, 72.63%). Often, these young characters replaced adults as socialization agents. The value of friendships was emphasized by the tight-knit group of friends who spent time together, played, experienced adventures, solved problems, and proved their bravery and solidarity with one another. Friendship was also characterized by creativity, the ability to invent and develop new, innovative, and original ideas (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001). Creativity was manifested through flexible thought and cooperation among peers in everyday behavior and problem solving.

For example, the series *The World of Peter Rabbit and Friends* (Hop) followed Peter and his friends Lily Bobtail, Benjamin Bunny, and Squirrel Nutkin as they

cleverly and bravely dealt with the fox, weasel, and owl's desire to devour them. The rabbits also escaped from the farmer whose vegetable patch was their main source of food. In the episode "The Bird Trap," the group of friends tried to free a bird who was captured in a cage by the fox. The fox, in turn, tried to capture the bunnies who came to the bird's rescue. Peter used a bird-chirp whistle to lure the fox to the forest as Lily and Benjamin tried to reach the trap at the entrance to the fox's house by stacking logs as stairs. When this strategy failed, Lily found a creative way to release the bird: she tied a rope to the roof to slide with Benjamin toward the cage. This successful cooperative endeavor highlighted the courage and support between the friends, as Lily told Benjamin: "rabbits are brave" and "you can do it, Benjamin. I'll help you."

The Inconsistent Representation of Siblings

Forty-two (4.32%) main characters were coded as siblings; siblings were identified in only a few programs. No clear pattern of sibling portrayals was found. The documentary-type show *Moriya-ya* (Luli) exhibited the classic sibling model in which the older sibling served as an authority socialization figure for the younger sibling in her everyday experiences. In contrast, *YaYa and Zouk* (JimJam) presented a reversal of the traditional age hierarchy as Yaya, the older sister, was entirely dependent on her younger brother Zouk. In *Grandpa Joe's Magical Playground* (Baby), siblings Gil and Gili engaged in parallel tasks with no verbal communication between them.

Discussion

This study is unique in its thematic examination of a wide range of portrayals of early childhood socialization agents in television programs aired on channels directed for young children (birth to 6 years of age). It applies cultivation theory, which considers the relational messages television conveys to its young viewers as important contributors to their development of perceptions about socialization agents (Callister & Robinson, 2010). The findings point to a portrayal of a largely imaginary world with endless possibilities and minimal restrictions for the child characters. The world presented to young viewers is saturated by caring and creative friendships and child characters who are leaders, problem solvers, and a support group for their friends. This televised world seems to belong to the young. Whereas this largely positive depiction of the invincible peer group may be empowering for young viewers, the shows include few and often weak presentations of adult socializing agents, such as parents and teachers. That is, these shows do not offer a balanced view of socializing agents for early childhood and lack depictions of the most significant individuals in their young viewers' lives. In this, there is a disconnect between the real social world of children and the televised environment to which they are exposed on a regular and extensive basis (Lemish, 2007).

The unrealistic representation of the social world is problematic especially regarding pre-school age viewers, who do not yet fully comprehend that television content is fictional and often unrealistic (Tidhar & Lemish, 2003). Among two-year-olds, television is perceived as a mirror of the world, reflecting reality as it is (Strasburger et al., 2014). Older children can differentiate between "real" situations and those unlikely to take place in reality, though still only on the basis of physical characteristics. Thus, two- to seven-year -old children perceive almost all television content as real and relate to it as such.

A World of Friends

Friendships are central to most plots with an emphasis on cooperation, courage, solidarity, and social cohesion. The depicted friendships enable the characters to act creatively and provide a fruitful basis for original ideas and elasticity of thought. Friendship is a strong basis from which the child characters deal with obstacles. It allows team members to suggest alternative solutions, and following trial and error, friendship enables choosing the best course of action.

The real-world friendship group is important in encouraging a healthy developmental trajectory in young children; friendship teaches children skills including cooperation, perspective-taking, and intimacy and provides affirmation, sets norms, and instills confidence (Crosnoe, 2000). Per cultivation theory, observing dominant friendship groups in the media may serve as a context for learning about friendship and enjoying its benefits (e.g., de Leeuw & van der Laan, 2017). Viewers also may learn about the emotions that accompany friendship (e.g., empathy, happiness) and about morals, as peer portrayals often deal with solving problems. Learning about emotions and morals is important as young children are only beginning to develop their understanding of social situations and need regular and positive examples of such instances (Berk, 2005).

A World with Few Adults

The mirror finding to the dominance of the peer group is the near absence of adult characters from these television shows. From the most important and constant figures in the real world, parents are largely marginalized in television plots. Consistent with cultivation theory (Morgan et al., 2014), as television viewing can lead to perception development which can serve as the basis for future expectations, the absence of meaningful adult characters from the content may be associated with an underestimation of their real-world importance. As Hendriyani et al. (2016) wrote, "invisibility in the media indicates the absence of social power" (p. 374). Even these limited portrayals are often problematic as parents are presented as unauthoritative, childish, and immature – far from traditional authoritative depictions that would elevate parents as role models for their children. Though not a phenomenon unique to television (e.g., Tucker, 2005), its occurrence here is concerning as young children spend the most considerable amount of pastime with television content (Rideout, 2013).

The depiction of parents as questionable socialization figures is coupled with a dubious portrayal of educational figures as incompetent and clueless. Young viewers, whose everyday real world is dominated by such adult figures, who protect them and teach them morals, do not see such representations in their televised environment.

It is important to recognize a group of adult socialization figures that is more positively presented in the television shows targeting young children: grandparents. Grandparents characters redefine and challenge the traditional media stereotype of old and insignificant people (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). They largely are presented as active, meaningful, educational, and entertaining figures for the child characters; they are presented in validating and respectful portrayals, similar to the central role grandparents have in the daily reality of grandchildren. Unfortunately, there are very few portrayals of grandparents in the content.

A World of Imagination

Another significant finding is the centrality of the imaginary world in early childhood television programs, consistent with the centrality of imagination among young children. Imaginary content may serve as a safe, playful harbor and allow the development of children's creativity in a space in which reality is suspended (Silverstone, 1993). But, in this sample, the imaginary world serves as a barrier between socialization agents: Adult socialization agents are present mainly in the real world framing of the plot (which takes up a significantly smaller portion of the episodes) whereas peers dominate the imaginary world. The two types of socializing agents rarely provide healthy role modeling opportunities of interactions between them. Moreover, the content presents mostly unrealistic portrayals of invincible child characters, who are free from adult supervision. Young viewers who find the content credible may have difficulty understanding what is im/possible in the real world and how helpful parents can be in many situations.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Audience effects studies should complement this content analysis to enable an understanding of the relationships between the content and children's perceptions of and interactions with socializing agents in their everyday lives. Combining the current content analysis with audience investigations can facilitate the creation of media literacy programs to empower young children in their interactions with media content. Further, the thematic analysis was done by adult researchers. Though the analysis considered children's developmental characteristics and abilities, future research should examine actual child viewers' interpretations of the content, deciphering what elements in the content young viewers notice, consider important, and adopt into their lives.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the structure of many children shows' narratives involve a distinction between a real world and an imaginary world. The imaginary world is dominated by young characters: groups of children who spend time together, solve problems, and prove bravery and creativity. Adults are often delegated to the plots' margins and rarely presented as authority figures. Cultivation theory suggests these recurring patterns of representation are likely to have implications for young viewers' perceptions of reality and the important socialization agents that surround them.

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