

# “No Silly Girls’ Films!” Analysis of Estonian Preschool Children’s Gender Specific Tastes in Media Favourites and their Possible Implications for Preschool Learning Practices

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**Abstract** Although children often look for guidance on what is gender-appropriate behaviour from the media, children’s media favourites are still an underused learning resource in preschools, especially in the context of engaging in gender and values education. Focus-group interviews were conducted with 61 children aged from 5.5 to 7 years from three geographically different preschools in Estonia to investigate the nature of media content that Estonian preschool children liked the most and who were the media characters that they considered as role models. The findings are presented with suggestions on how to use children’s media favourites in the preschool curriculum. Our findings revealed strong gender-specific tastes in the media content that the preschool children liked and the characters that they favoured. While boys preferred action-adventure and scary movies and named mainly superheroes or characters with superpowers as their favourites, girls enjoyed family shows, films and comedies and liked characters such as fairies, angels, princesses and similar fictional characters. The findings indicated that preschool children are an active and enthusiastic media audience. The children eagerly took on the role of co-performers of media experiences, acted out aspects of the programs and mimicked the activities of their favourites. We offer suggestions for teachers on how to make use of children’s media favourites in teaching so as to help the children not only to negotiate issues of gender but also to understand how the media shape behaviour, values, and emotional well-being.

**Keywords** Preschool children · Favourite media characters · Gender · Social learning · Preschool curriculum

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**Résumé** Même si les enfants cherchent à être guidés sur ce que sont des comportements de genre appropriés provenant des médias, les préférences médiatiques des enfants sont encore des ressources sous-utilisées au préscolaire, surtout dans le contexte de l'engagement en éducation aux valeurs et au genre. Des entrevues par groupe de discussion ont été menées auprès de 61 enfants de 5,5 à 7 ans de trois écoles maternelles géographiquement différentes d'Estonie pour étudier la nature du contenu médiatique que les enfants estoniens préfèrent et quels sont les personnages qu'ils considèrent des modèles. Les résultats sont présentés avec des suggestions sur la façon d'utiliser les préférences médiatiques des enfants dans le programme préscolaire. Nos résultats révèlent des goûts très spécifiques au genre dans les contenus médiatiques que les enfants aiment et les personnages qu'ils préfèrent. Alors que les garçons préfèrent des films d'action et d'aventure qui font peur et nomment surtout des super héros ou des personnages super puissants comme favoris, les filles se plaisent dans des émissions familiales, des films et des comédies et aiment des personnages de fées, d'anges, de princesses et autres personnages fictifs similaires. Les résultats indiquent que les enfants d'âge préscolaire constituent un public médiatique actif et enthousiaste. Les enfants tenaient avec empressement le rôle de co-interprètes des expériences médiatiques, jouaient des scènes des émissions et mimaient les activités de leurs personnages favoris. Nous faisons des suggestions aux enseignants sur la façon de se servir des préférences médiatiques des enfants dans l'enseignement pour aider les enfants non seulement à négocier les questions de genre mais aussi à comprendre comment les médias façonnent le comportement, les valeurs et le bien-être émotionnel.

**Resumen** Aunque los niños suelen buscar en los medios de comunicación orientaciones sobre qué es un comportamiento adecuado a su género, los contenidos audiovisuales más populares entre los niños son un recurso de aprendizaje infrautilizado en las guarderías, especialmente en el contexto y la práctica de la educación en género y en valores. Se llevaron a cabo veinticinco entrevistas en grupos focales ( $N = 61$ ) con niños de 5,5 a 7 años de tres centros preescolares de tres regiones geográficas distintas en Estonia para investigar qué tipo de contenidos mediáticos les gustan más a los preescolares estonios y cuáles son sus personajes favoritos a los que consideran un modelo. Los resultados del estudio son interpretados para ofrecer soluciones sobre cómo implementar los materiales audiovisuales favoritos de los niños en el contexto del currículum preescolar. Hemos encontrado preferencias de género muy marcadas en el contenido audiovisual que les gusta a los niños y en los personajes que prefieren. Mientras los niños preferían películas de acción y terror y mencionaban fundamentalmente a súper-héroes o personajes con poderes como sus favoritos, las niñas preferían programas familiares, películas y comedias y les gustaban más las hadas, ángeles, princesas y otros personajes de ficción fuera de la realidad. Los resultados indican que los preescolares no son sólo una audiencia activa y entusiasta de contenidos audiovisuales, sino que también asumen con entusiasmo un papel de co-representantes de los contenidos audiovisuales a la par que resaltan ciertos aspectos de los programas e imitan las actividades de los que son sus favoritos. Ofrecemos sugerencias a los profesores sobre cómo hacer uso de los contenidos audiovisuales favoritos de los niños en la

enseñanza, para ayudarles no sólo a negociar los asuntos de género, sino también a formar su comportamiento, valores y bienestar emocional.

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the characteristics of preschool children's favourite media content and characters. We consider the topic to be important in the context of preschool curricula, as media content in general, and animated movies targeted to children in particular should be regarded as teaching machines which can potentially shape the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of children. Furthermore, many scholars (e.g. Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis 2012) have stressed the need to view children's favourite media characters as potential role models who have a socialising influence on children regarding their attitudes towards gender roles. In fact, children often not only look for guidance on what is gender-appropriate behaviour from the media but also relate to their favourite media characters in order to try out new roles, construct one's identities, and to form social relationships with other children.

Regardless the fact that informal learning often takes place in the media environment, preschool settings and preschool curricula regularly fail to take into account children's popular cultural interests (e.g. Souto-Manning and Price-Dennis 2012). In Estonia, for example, the national curriculum does not even contain media education as a subject field and, as a result, teachers do not have enough knowledge as to how to use media as a learning resource (Siibak and Vinter 2010). At the same time, as 81.5 % of all three- to six-year-olds in Estonia are attending preschool daily (Statistics Estonia 2011), the role and responsibility of teachers in shaping children's understanding about media and hence the question of suitable teaching methods are of vital importance. We set out to study children's media preferences and characteristics of their favourites in order to gain more detailed knowledge on the topic and later offer suggestions to the preschool teachers how to better make use of children's media preferences in the context of learning.

## Theoretical Background

### *Popular Media Texts and the Formation of Children's Gendered Identities*

Earlier research on the topic of gender and young children's screen media consumption has mainly made use of two theoretical frameworks: cultivation theory and social learning theory. More recently, though, researchers involved in gender studies (e.g. Davies 2003) have started to make use of the post-structuralism perspective, which emphasises the relational nature of gendered identities, when analysing the role of media in shaping children's views about gender. Hence, rather than focusing on emphasising the amount of exposure, an approach used by cultivation theorists, or the type of exposure, an approach common to social learning theorists, many present-day gender and education scholars have started to argue that media content may help children to "tease out some of the complexities and alert

children to the ways in which gender is constructed within texts and how those texts shape their own subjectivities” (Marsh 2003, p. 73).

In the context of this paper, however, we will rely on Bandura (1977), who has stressed that people do not need real experiences in order to learn but can learn by observing others, for instance on screens, when engaged in the process of observational learning. According to Bandura (1977), the three main components that determine observational learning—personal skills (which include attention skills), interests or prior beliefs, and behavioural actions as choices in looking at certain things and environmental events that are taking place—are closely connected to people’s choices and preferences. Re-playing, rehearsing or recalling the original scene, for example, helps to maintain a particular script in memory, which makes it possible to apply it to future situations (Huessman 1988), so that observational learning may later be expressed in demonstrations of behaviour, thoughts, emotions or attitudes. However, while doing so, children are likely to also imitate what they see, without recognizing behaviours that might be dangerous or socially inappropriate.

Furthermore, according to Hoffner’s (1996) wishful identification concept, positive admiration and imitation may even lead to children imagining that they are like media characters. Among other things, media present behavioural scripts for how to behave in unfamiliar situations. For instance, it sometimes becomes difficult for children, and also some adults, to distinguish between reality and fantasy, so that their favourite fantasy characters and superhuman powers may seem real to them (Lieberman et al. 2009). This is also one of the reasons why some scholars have urged researchers to pay more attention to the way children use and interpret television fiction and the actions of their media favourites.

### *Young Children’s Media Favourites*

Studies (e.g. Hill 2004) suggest that preschool children primarily expect TV shows and media content in general to be full of action and funny but also engaging and entertaining. Cartoons are particularly highly valued among children because of their funny, engaging and stimulating content (Chambers et al. 1998). Research by Chambers et al. (1998, p. 39) also suggests that boys, “enjoy goodies (in whatever form) beating the baddies”. The latter is also a reason why boys have been found to be especially fond of action cartoons where the main characters are often physically strong (Hoffner 1996).

In the selection of favourite media characters, studies indicate that boys of all ages are more prone to select fantasy characters (Woolley 1997) and male characters as their favourites (Hoffner 1996). In addition to gender-specific tastes, children also tend to value gender-linked attributes in their favourite characters. For example, according to Hoffner (1996), the attractiveness of the character (both male and female) is the main determinant for identification and likeability among girls whereas in the case of boys, identification is predicted by the physical strength of the character (Wilson and Drogos 2007). It should be noted, however, that there is variation within groups of boys and groups of girls.

### *Educational Uses of Media Favourites in Preschool*

As young children often adopt society's values, attitudes and norms through their exposure to popular media, Singer and Singer (2007) emphasise that media literacy curricula should take into account not only how media can affect children emotionally and influence their cognitive processing but also how it may change their beliefs. Furthermore, Davies and Saltmarsh (2007, p. 14) suggest that the usage of popular cultural texts in preschool learning contexts provides teachers with "a space in which dominant narratives can be disrupted and alternative subject positions and gender identities explored".

Although some authors (e.g. Richert et al. 2009) have claimed that the use of fantasy characters from popular culture may not be beneficial for teaching preschool children about real life information, others have eagerly recommended using superheroes in the context of values education. For instance, according to Martin (2007), incorporating superheroes (e.g. Superman, Batman and Spiderman) into children's lessons may also not only help to facilitate children's learning but may help to prepare them to recognize the difference between positive and negative influences in other contexts

Regardless of many positive examples, preschool settings and preschool curricula still regularly fail to take into account children's popular cultural interests. In fact, in many countries, preschool teachers even have not yet had sufficient professional development training to take advantage of these opportunities (Siibak and Vinter 2010).

### The Present Study

The aim of the present study is to analyse what kind of media content Estonian preschool children like the most and who their favourite media characters are, who they consider their role models. Twenty-five focus-group interviews ( $N = 61$ ) with 5.5–7-year-old children from Estonia were carried out to study children's descriptions of their favourite media content and characters. We interpret the findings of the study so as to offer suggestions on how to implement children's media favourites in the context of the preschool curriculum and values education in an effort to help children negotiate and react to issues of gender in relation to other societal power structures. We believe that incorporating children's media favourites into the everyday teaching practices of preschools is crucial as children are not passive recipients in the socialisation process but tend to learn gendered discourses through participating in the communities of practice, i.e. in groups that share particular discourses. Although preschool context offers great opportunities to explore the theme, children's popular cultural interests are still quite rarely used for formal learning.

## Methods

### Participants

In Estonia, children from 18 months to 7 years are attending preschools that follow state curricula specifically formulated to foster child's development and growth

before the child goes to basic school at the age of seven. Preschools in Estonia are divided into municipal and private institutions both of which aim to “create possibilities and conditions for the formation of healthy personality who is socially and mentally alert, self-confident and considerate of others and who values the environment” (Preschool Child Care Institutions Act §3). We decided to carry out our study in municipal preschools located in geographically different regions of Estonia. We informed preschools about the aims of the study and those willing to participate formed the basis of our sample.

Our final sample included children from three municipal preschools—one from a big city with 4,20,000 inhabitants ( $N = 31$ ), one from a small town with 34,000 inhabitants ( $N = 18$ ) and one from a rural area with 250 inhabitants ( $N = 12$ ) and comprised only those children whose parents had signed a written consent form. Our sample comprised of two groups from each preschool: two mixed-age groups of children from the rural preschool and two same-age children’s groups from a preschool in a big city and from a small town.

Special permission was first obtained from the schools to carry out the study. After receiving the consent, the second author of this paper had a meeting with the parents of all the children potentially forming the sample. The aim of the meeting was to introduce our research aims and procedures, as well as to offer parents an opportunity to ask questions. All of the parents attending the meeting also received written summaries of the study and special consent forms to be signed if they were willing to allow their children to participate.

Only after gaining the consent of the parents was the children’s willingness to take part in the study determined. As some of the parents did not sign the written consent forms, not every child from the six preschool groups participated in the study. The final sample consisted of 61 preschool children (31 from the big city, 18 from the small town and 12 from the rural area), with approximately equal numbers of boys ( $n = 31$ ) and girls ( $n = 30$ ).

All the participants in our study were 5.5–7 years old. This particular age group was selected because children at this age are quite capable of expressing themselves verbally (Darbishire et al. 2005) and thus could purposefully reflect upon their own experiences. Furthermore, our decision was influenced by the fact that adult perspective researches tend to assess children through a filtering process, diminishing children’s own insights (Lansdown 2004).

## Procedure

The data were collected with the use of focus-group interviews ( $N = 25$ ). The second author of this paper, who is also a former preschool teacher, conducted all 25 focus groups. As mix-gender focus-groups are said to work nicely when children know each other well (Hill et al. 1996), the majority of our focus groups were mix-gender groups with mainly five to six members in each. The groups were formed on a random basis, and to lessen potential peer pressure and elicit more valid results, most of the groups comprised children from two different preschool groups. Most children took part in two different themed focus groups, but not more.

The interviews took place over a period of 10 weeks, from September to December 2010, and lasted approximately 15–30 min. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In conducting the interviews, we relied on the experience of Darbishire et al. (2005). The focus groups included some predetermined questions, although the exact wording of the questions was flexible and depended on the responses given by the respondents. The interview questions were divided into three blocks: (1) children's screen favourites (nine focus groups,  $N = 42$ ), (2) preferences and emotional responses to what was seen on the screen (nine focus groups,  $N = 44$ ), and (3) children's observations regarding media content and parental mediation (seven focus groups,  $N = 35$ ) with 30 predetermined questions (e.g. What kind of things do you enjoy watching from the TV the most?; What kind of TV shows you do not enjoy watching at all?; What is the funniest TV show you have seen and why was this show funny?; what is the scariest TV show you have seen and why did you think it was scary?; if you think about the characters you have seen from TV then who are your favourites?; what do you like the most about your favourite character?; have you ever played something that you have seen from TV or from computer?; if you could be one character that you have seen from TV or computer, whom would you be?, etc.) in total.

Despite our initial aim of covering just one topic per focus group, the analysis of the data collected indicated that children's media favourites and media content preferences were recurrent themes in every focus group. Hence, material from all the focus groups was combined when writing this article.

Themes were explicated and analysed from recorded interviews until data saturation was reached. For example, as no significant regional differences emerged in the answers given by the children, fewer focus groups were conducted on the theme of children's observations about media content and parental mediation.

## Measures

The analysis was performed in two phases. In the first phase, two independent researchers analysed the interviews from both of the studies separately. The format was organized around categories that emerged from the data and based on the research questions. The data interpretation was cyclical, starting with line-by-line coding, which was then established in an organized structure. In coding, we considered only those statements that concerned children's media preferences and their favourite characters. After open coding, we selected the categories that were most crucial to the research questions and searched for evidence from as many different text sections as possible, as well as structuring the relationships between categories.

The lead author of the article made use of the procedures of the grounded theory approach while the second author used the NVivo program to analyse the data. This approach was selected for the analysis as it made it possible to move between data collection and analysis in terms of coding and creating models. However, relying on the analysis of Hutchinson et al. (2010), who claim that NVivo data analysis software can be used to encourage good quality, grounded theoretical research by facilitating many of the iterative characteristics associated with this technique, we

decided to combine these two different approaches to ensure reliability in interpretation, including triangulation across authors and approaches.

In the second phase of the analysis, coded categories were compared and consensus was reached in terms of the major categories, all of which were supported by specific examples from the interview transcripts. However, relying on the arguments by Kelle (2005), who suggests that “empirically grounded theory building starts by making a careful choice among a variety of concepts with diverging theoretical backgrounds”, we made use of our own previous theoretical knowledge to identify theoretically relevant phenomena in the data and to clarify the concepts used in our own analysis.

## Results

### General Tendencies in Children’s Preferences with Regard to Media Content

In describing their favourite media content, children often used the words “funny” and “exciting”. Analysis of the children’s descriptions of humorous media content showed that the boys and girls in our sample found similar things humorous. Situation comedies, especially when people were falling down or having other accidents (e.g. “Wipeout”, “America’s Funniest Home Videos” and “Tom and Jerry”), were considered to be the funniest to watch.

G (1, big city): What was cool in [the film] *Beethoven* was the way the bad guy was climbing from one branch to another and slipped and they all fell in the mud.

B (2, rural area): Like when the leaves dropped down and they got them in their mouths.

Foreign-language media content was enjoyed only when there were special effects and fast-paced action. For instance, such Hollywood films as “*The Mummy*” and “*Batman*” were liked by many for those very reasons, whereas soap operas, dramas, news programmes and cooking and home shows were thought to be boring.

B (1, big city): One of my mum’s favourite shows is “*Heartbeat*”, but I think it’s boring, because all they do is stand around and talk.

G (1, big city): My granny and great-granny watch “*The Bold and the Beautiful*”, but I don’t like that either, because it’s all in another language and they do all this boring stuff.

In general, our analysis revealed that the less intellectual effort media content required in order to be followed, the more children liked it and the more likely they were to watch it through to the end. Furthermore, our interviews indicate that both boys and girls are attentive to content which is easy to understand and/or in their mother tongue, free of verbal information and marked by humour (both positive and negative) and violence. Visual effects, playful content and fast-paced action also gain their attention.



## Gender-Specific Media Preferences

Interviews revealed that, although cartoons, kids' shows, local serials and foreign movies (such as "Avatar", "Transformers", "The Mummy" and the "Twilight" saga) were equally popular among both sexes, children's preferences about their favourite adult media content differed. For instance, girls claimed to like various family shows, films and comedies. Boys, however, attributed a greater level of excitement to shows and films involving cars (such as "Top Gear") and car-racing (such as "F1"), fight scenes and battles, and scenes designed to scare them. In fact, action-adventure and scary movies were referred to as "boys' films" by both the boys and the girls alike.

I: So you like films where people fight each other and get killed?

Children (as one, with great enthusiasm): Yeah!!!

I: But why do you like them?

B(2): Because they're cool! And they're guys' films.

B(1): They're films for boys. They're not silly girls' films.

(Interview transcript from the preschool in a big city)

...

G (1, small town): I don't like watching boys' films on TV. I turn them off and run to my mum. There's all sorts of them, but I get scared and run to my mum.

Here it is important to note that scenes containing fighting and killing provoked ambivalent "kind of like them, kind of don't" reactions in children. Although action movies proved to be the greatest favourites among the boys, they tended to agree with the girls in saying that action movies in general might not be that nice to watch.

Similar conflicting emotions were reflected in discussions of the existence of various supernatural creatures, such as ghosts and vampires, as borders between fact and fiction created confusion among the children. The analysis of our data revealed that even if the preschoolers were convinced that monsters and such creatures did not exist, it would only take one child in the group to express doubt before the others changed their minds and decided that they did exist after all.

B(1): There's no such thing as ghosts.

G(1): *I thought I had a dream last night that I saw a ghost, but I didn't – I actually saw one.*

B(1) (surprised): *A real ghost?*

(Interview transcript from the rural area)

Our interviews also reveal that all of the children in our sample had copied the activities of various supernatural creatures and other favourites they had seen on the screen in their games. During the interviews both boys and girls described scenarios and characters they had copied with great excitement, indicating that they consciously made use of media content while playing. Even though girls appeared to be more excited about watching media content that provided them with opportunities for follow-up activities and mimicking, boys from the sample were also eager to replay the adventures of their favourite characters.

B (1, big city) I watched a zombie movie and then played it.

G (1, small town) I saw Tommy and Jerry from TV, and [then played that] I was the cat and my friend was the mouse and I tickled her all the time

### Children's Media Favourites

Interviews indicate that although children often named similar character types as their favourites, the favourites they named still tended to be gender-specific (see Table 1).

In fact, only in case of animated animal characters from children's shows and cartoons e.g. Scooby Doo, Tom and Jerry and Shaun the Sheep, were named as favourites both among the boys and the girls.

G (1, small town): I like that cat and that mouse, in that cartoon—Tom and Jerry.

In case of all the other character types, children's tastes in favourites differed. For instance, although *fairytale characters* were equally liked by the girls and the boys; the former took a liking to characters like Pinocchio, Snow White, Little Mermaid and the Moomins, whereas the latter named Ninja turtles, pirates and vampires as the main objects of fascination.

Our analysis suggests that boys' favourite *realistic human-like characters* were the ones who had demanding and heroic jobs. For instance, in addition to various police officers and criminal investigators from TV shows, boys also cherished similar characteristics in their favourites from adult movies (e.g. Bond 007) and children's programs (Fireman Sam). Girls, however, named princesses and Lazy Lucy as their most favourite realistic human-like characters from the media.

Our findings also show that characters with superpowers and the theme of good vs evil (including fights and battles, weapons of war etc.) caught the attention of the boys most easily. This is also the reason why the greatest gender-based differences in the choice of media favourites emerged in the case of such cartoon and animated characters as Spiderman, Bakugan, Batman, Ben Ten and Iceman. These *fantasy characters with superpowers* were clear favourites among the boys; conversely, never once were these kinds of characters named as the favourites of girls. The main

**Table 1** Categories of media characters nominated as favourites by boys and girls

Category of favourite character	Boys % (n)	Girls % (n)
Animated animals	15 % (6)	29 % (10)
Fairytale characters	19 % (8)	26 % (9)
Characters from children's programs	10 % (4)	9 % (3)
Characters from adult programs	10 % (4)	3 % (1)
Fantasy characters with super powers	46 % (19)	–
Animals	–	26 % (9)
Real people	–	6 % (2)
Total number	41	34

**Table 2** Qualities that boys and girls liked most about their favourite character

Category of favourite character	Boys % (n)	Girls % (n)
Physical capabilities	–	13 % (3)
Battles between good and evil	18 % (8)	–
Superpowers	30 % (14)	4 % (1)
Fighting and weapons of war	30 % (14)	–
Funny/humorous	18 % (8)	30 % (7)
Cute/beautiful	–	22 % (5)
Helps others	–	4 % (1)
Interesting and action-filled plot	4 % (2)	26 % (6)
Total Number	46	23

fantasy characters with superpowers whom the girls liked were fairies and angels i.e. characters who have been traditionally considered to be favourites among the girls and disliked among the boys.

In general, the interviews indicated that fictional and non-life-like characters were mainly named as children's favourites. Only on a few occasions were actual people, such as the pop idol Justin Bieber and the well-known Estonian singer Ithaka Maria, mentioned.

#### Media Favourites as Role Models

We also asked children to explain what the aspects they most enjoyed in their favourites were. Preschoolers' answers suggest that boys and girls value different things and qualities in their favourites (see Table 2).

Although many favourites of boys were often engaged in fights and known for their violent behaviour, boys considered these characters to be the "good guys" and appreciated their fights against the evil. The latter was also the reason why many of the preschool boys we interviewed named Batman, Bond 007, Bomberman and the like as their role models whose actions and adventures they liked to mimic in their own games.

B (2, big city): I'd like to be 007 because then I could fight the bad guys.

B (3, big city): I'd be Rocketman—no, Bomberman! Then I could blow up all the bad guys.

The examples above demonstrate that for the boys in our sample killing people, beating them up and violence in general were seen as permissible if perpetrated in the name of "doing good". Good intentions aside, such a tendency is potentially dangerous, since the aggressive behaviour of children's favourites gives rise to a justification of extreme violence. Furthermore, when talking about their favourite characters boys tended to highlight their physical capabilities, particularly in the sense of them "being strong", as well as their aggressive behaviour (e.g. punching people) and supernatural abilities (e.g. flying).

B (1, big city): I like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles because they're strong and they have all these weapons and that's how they save people.

In addition to heroes with superpowers, the boys also idolised inanimate objects, e.g. machinery with superpowers (e.g. Thunder McQueen and the Transformers). The extracts below illustrate the fact that the boys tended to rate their favourites according to their characteristics and abilities, and not based on realism. Furthermore, many of the boys wanted to be able to do the things their favourites were able to and hence sometimes identified themselves with their favourite inanimate objects seen on the screen.

B (2, small town): I'd like to be the semi-trailer that's driving along then jumps, then drives all over the place, all over the lane and road, then drives and twists around, then it jumps too high.

B (4, big city): I'd like to be Thunder McQueen; then I'd scare those tractors.

In addition to having various superpowers, the boys also valued the fact that many of their favourites had an ability to change and transform, very highly.

B (1, small town): I'd like to be a Bakugan, because if he throws a ball onto a map, he turns into a monster and gets bigger.

In contrast to the boys, the girls in our sample tended to value characters based on their skills (e.g. swimming or running fast).

G (1, small town): I'd like to be like the Little Mermaid, because she can swim fast.

In fact, our analysis suggests that the girls assessed the unique abilities and personalities of their media favourites differently to the boys. For instance, unlike the boys, the girls considered the qualities and personalities of their favourites to be extremely important (e.g. how helpful they were towards others). In several instances, for example, the girls said that they associated themselves with characters that were funny.

G (1, small town): I'd like to be a clown, or Pinocchio, because they do silly things, and then people would laugh at what I was doing.

Furthermore, the girls also often associated themselves with favourites who had an ability to charm others (mostly by their sweetness and good looks).

G (1, small town): I'd like to be a fairy, because they're so pretty and they can charm people.

All of the above demonstrates that the choices of preschoolers' media favourites often reflected traditional gender stereotypes, with the young girls valuing beauty, good manners and socialising skills in their favourites, and the boys liking strong, courageous and heroic characters who occasionally also stood in opposition to social norms.

## Discussion

The findings of our empirical study allow us to claim that media favourites play a significant role in the everyday life-worlds of young children. Our focus-group interviews reaffirm that preschool children often "appropriate popular media

material (e.g. its content and genres) as a means of cultural production, that is, as a means of constructing social affiliations, expressive practices and imaginative worlds” (Haas Dyson 2001, p. 13). Preschoolers in our sample enthusiastically described their favourite media characters whose adventures and activities they often mimic and use as a resource for ideas in their play. However, similar to Wohlwend (2012), our findings also reveal that during play, children may learn not only how to challenge gender stereotypes but also how to reproduce them. Furthermore, we believe that children’s media favourites offer powerful pedagogical tools in the context of curriculum-based learning. Thus, in the following section, we make use of our empirical findings to offer some suggestions for preschool teachers for incorporating children’s media favourites into their everyday teaching practices.

### Implication for Practice

According to the National Curriculum for Preschool Child Care Institutions §5 (2008), in Estonia, schooling and education conditions need to develop a child’s ability to “relate new knowledge to earlier experiences and use the acquired knowledge in different situations and activities” as well as “to develop the child’s understanding of the surrounding environment.” Based on our results, we suggest that children’s independent interpretation and analytical thinking skills could be further developed if preschool teachers initiated more discussions of children’s favourite media content. Other authors, for instance Souto-Manning and Price (2012), have also recommended making use of content from popular culture to promote discussions among young children.

First of all, we suggest that scenes from fights and battles, and scenes with weapons of war and violence, could be used in values education. Encouraging children to participate in discussions on this topic and allowing them to engage in role play are especially important in the context of Superhero and Bad Guy play, which is often popular among preschool boys. Furthermore, as highlighted by Marsh (2003), it is crucial for teachers to acknowledge that due to the domination of male superheroes, there are much fewer versions of masculinities on offer for young boys in the media. Discussions of “the good, the bad, and the beautiful” (Northup and Liebler 2010, p. 265), however, are crucial in the context of girls’ favourites, as young women strive for beauty, and the idea that beauty is good and the lack of beauty is bad is often amongst the main themes in television shows.

We also believe that children’s media favourites can be used to develop children’s understanding of the surrounding environment and ethical behaviour, which are yet other tasks associated with curriculum-based schooling (National ... 2008, §3). For instance, interpreting the actions of boys’ favourite characters, such as Spiderman, Bomberman and Batman, by placing them in a real-world context would help children to understand the consequences of extreme violence these fantasy characters often portray. As children come from different backgrounds and circumstances, teachers need to work together with children in order to understand what kind of content and in which context is appropriate and what is not. Furthermore, when analysing the scenes together in a classroom setting children are

automatically participating in the communities of practice which would enable them to gain additional understanding not only about the gender and power discourses in a society but also about being human.

Thirdly, as preschool children also struggle to differentiate between the real and imaginary worlds, as well as between “right” and “wrong”, adult attention and explanations are crucial in order to give proper meaning to the actions seen on the screen and the tasks performed by their favourite characters. For instance, similar to the findings of Cantor et al. (2010), our results show that despite the general enthusiasm of children, boys in particular, when talking about such movies as “Transformers” or “The Mummy”, their reactions often included their fears as well as questions about the existence of such supernatural creatures as vampires, ghosts and monsters. From the pedagogical perspective, the above-mentioned characters could be used not only to initiate discussions with children but also to help them formulate realistic understandings of the world around them and to assess adequately whether certain actions and types of behaviour are dangerous or socially appropriate. In other words, teachers have an important role in helping children to acquire an understanding about ethical production and dissemination of information.

The fact that the children perceived aggressive media content to be humorous was also clearly connected to their limited experience in evaluating what the consequences of certain actions would be for the people/characters involved in real life. Although research indicates that children’s humour usually does not consist of malicious delight, they often still enjoy slapstick humour or practical jokes. Hence, we believe that encouragement and supportive feedback from parents and teachers (as well as disapproval where required) in regard to such humour is not only of the utmost importance but also makes it possible to develop discussions of moral values.

We also believe that writing different scripts with popular characters and acting them out in a positive manner can be a good source for educating children about gender roles. Hence, we recommend that teachers be more active in giving children an opportunity to become creative media producers, for instance by engaging them in animation production or live action filming. Incorporating one’s favourite characters into a video and analysing their behaviour after staging on a screen could help to get children personally engaged in the topic.

In addition to the above-mentioned possibilities, children’s favourite media characters could also be used in the context of formal preschool learning practices. For instance, the Batman and Catwoman characters have been successfully used in motivating preschoolers to take part in literacy-focused role play activities (Marsh 1999).

All in all, we believe that the findings of our study and the suggestions for practice help to illustrate the fact that children’s media favourites could be seen as an opportunity to build new knowledge and understanding about gender.

### The Limitations

Our findings offer insight into young children’s media preferences and favourite characters. Nevertheless, the present findings should be viewed with some caution given the limitations of this project. Firstly, due to the relatively small and

homogeneous sample, which did not enable us to analyse the media consumption differences between girls and boys, nor the different groups of boys and girls, the study cannot be considered externally valid. Secondly, although the focus groups were comprised of children from different preschool groups, possible peer pressure still might have had an impact on their responses. Thirdly, we only relied on the self-reports of children and, hence, gained no knowledge of their actual everyday practices.

### Directions for Future Research

Future research should include both more preschoolers and children who are not attending formal preschools so as to analyse whether there are differences in their media preferences. Such a focus could help to identify for instance if children attending preschools may spend less time watching television than children who stay at home.

### Conclusions

Preschool children form an active media audience with strong gender-specific tastes in the content they like and the characters they favour. While boys tend to prefer action-adventure and scary movies and mainly name superheroes or characters with superpowers as their favourites, girls rather enjoy family shows, films and comedies and love fictional characters like fairies, angels, princesses. Although both boys and girls are eager to mimic the activities of their favourites and make use of the aspects from their favourite programs while they play, children's media preferences also offer powerful pedagogical tools for teachers to be used in the context of curriculum-based learning. Furthermore, we believe that media content which is known and loved by children can be used not only to motivate preschoolers to learn but also help them to develop their analytical thinking and interpretative skills, as well as teach them about such important issues as gender, values, ethics and being human.

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