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# Cultural industries and character composition in children’s animated television series broadcast in Spain

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Animated television series are one of the most popular audiovisual media formats consumed by Spanish children. **Methods:** The study is based on the analysis of 432 leading characters from 352 children’s animated series broadcast in Spain television, since its beginning until 2015. Data were obtained from different websites specialised in this subject. As most data were nominal, the statistical analysis was based on chi square tests, contingency tables and coefficients. **Results and conclusions:** There are significant differences across the animated series in terms of character composition (age, morphology, sex and aesthetic) and factors such as nationality and production year. There is an elite of production companies with distinctive cultural patterns, especially the productions from the USA, Japan and Spain.

## Keywords

Television; Spain; animated television series; cultural industry; audiovisual contents; children’s collective imagination.

## Contents

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos** (PhD in Communication, University of London)

## 1. Introduction and state of the art

Children's animated series have been and continue to be a fundamental part of the entertainment of the youngest members of the television audience. The almost unlimited supply of media, channels and technological innovation make it increasingly easy for audiences to spend their free time in other types of alternative media activities. "Media entertainment is a ubiquitous phenomenon in society, it floods everything, to such an extent that it is possible to say that today's society lives in an *era of entertainment*" (Igartua & Humanes, 2004: 405) and digital audiovisual interaction (Astigarraga, Pavón & Zuberogitia, 2016).

It is important to note that audiovisual contents contribute to the configuration of society's collective imaginary, hence the importance of the institutional analysis of the media, which leads to study how media messages are produced and distributed. One of the most outstanding theoretical trends in this field is critical political economy, which studies the ownership and control of the media companies to demonstrate their links with the ruling class. As Lozano argues (1996), the main objective is to show that the owners of the media organisations and those who control them are part of the dominant capitalist class or respond to the interests of that class.

Much of the responsibility falls on the production companies, which have generated this development, without losing sight that, from the perspective of producers, the primary purpose of the large majority of audiovisual content is entertainment (Bryant & Zillmann, 2002).

Production companies have been key participants in this development by applying competitive strategies oriented to the child audience. This group is not only strategic from an economic point of view, but also from a cultural perspective as it has very specific characteristics such as being, even without having direct purchasing power, one of the most profitable age groups and one with the greatest purchase influence power. Young users become intensive media *spectators-consumers*, who use the media significantly in the construction of their cultural capital and identity. This way, in the area of children's television programming, it has been possible to establish how children's attitudes, values and behaviours can be influenced by the programmes they watch, which may contain violence or, for example, inadequate representations of various groups (Ortega & Igartua, 2012).

Therefore, the power of the cultural industries is of great relevance to understand the formation of ideologies in a society and their influence in the collective imaginary. Hence the importance and validity of studying «the influence of the mass media in general, and of television in particular, when it comes to transmitting a symbolic universe of common reference, creating a reality and generating patterns of social behaviour» (Campos & Garza, 2015:255).

The child audience, mostly targeted by cartoons, is a fragmented audience with differentiated habits and interests. Due to the different preferences of the child audience, the quality of cartoons must be valued according to what the public wants but always taking into account the influence cartoons can have on the formation and understanding of the real world. Quality would therefore be the perfect fit between what the audience expects of the content and what the content really is. “Communication is conceived as a necessary instrument not only to make things known, but also and specially to create in the receiver the adequate expectations” (Fernández, 2012:259).

It is in this social context where gender roles originate, being the feminine gender one of the most analysed subjects, particularly in the field of children’s animation over the last 40 years (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Bazzini, Curtin, Joslin, Regan, & Martz, 2010; Bono & Guichot-Reina, 2001; Brode, 2005; Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002; Oliver & Green, 2004). Some of the results about animated series include the finding that they feature “female profiles that would advocate for the empowerment of prototype images that would impregnate children’s imaginary by configuring solid and highly rooted media schemes” (Sánchez-LaBella, 2011:1).

Therefore, the conception of different types of stereotypes would be intimately linked to the cultural industries and to the society in which they are generated, not only encompassing gender issues, but also subjects such as the perceived image of other cultures in television (Igartua, Barrios & Ortega, 2012).

In addition, cultural entertainment industries disseminate their ideologies through other platforms such as radio, cinema, newspapers and especially through consumer products such as clothing, games and other merchandising (Sardar & Van, 2015), making the audiovisual sector just one of many forms of propaganda mediation, as argued by cultural studies.

There is also a significant cultivation effect on children’s cognitive and social construction. In this sense, television would tend to show a skewed image of the social world, giving a high and recurrent presence to certain subjects, such as violence and stereotypes (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shanahan, 2002). The media space contains more violence, risks and threats than those existing in the real world. Such a disproportionate presence influences those spectators who spend more hours watching television, generating a threatening view of the world (Gerbner, 1998). The cultivation theory would indicate that “we are what we consume in the media”: what spectator view in the media would constitute their symbolic world (Gerbner, 2002).

Based on these theories, media corporations thus become a true *Private Ministry of Culture*, thereby contributing to shaping the dominant cultural trends. Cultural diversity, therefore, is greatly absent and this absence is justified by the management model of television networks, dependent of advertisers and their advertising content they demand (Igartua, 2007).

The consequences of the many hours that children spend in front of the TV include that they spend less time with their friends, reduce their hours of sleep and change their behaviour patterns with respect to the consumption of other media. In addition to being associated with slower readership development, prolonged exposure to programming with high doses of violence could stimulate or legitimise aggressive audience behaviours (Igartua & Humanes, 2004).

The time allocated to television consumption by children and young people in western countries has been associated to a substitutive effect on other activities. This causes them to be exposed to a mainstream view of the world that is little diverse with beliefs, frames, perspectives and values of the cultural capital that would depend on the production companies that have dominated the sector throughout history.

Therefore, there would be a high probability that cartoons or animated series are helping children to build identities, behaviours, stereotypes and social norms, with biased and little edifying and educational characteristics of reality.

The results in this field confirm the initial hypothesis that the cultivation of beliefs can be explained in a more appropriate way if one takes into consideration the effect of interaction between the degree of consumption of television and the motivations behind individuals' exposure. Therefore, this research not only arises as a mere descriptive analysis of certain technical characteristics of children's animated series, but tries to test whether there are patterns in the cultural industries to which these series belong, understanding that they can generate ideologies and possible biased collective imaginaries in society.

## 2. Methods

This research aims to analyse the largest possible number of series broadcast in Spanish television. The sample consists of 352 children's animated television series and 432 leading characters. Taking into consideration Vázquez's study (2009), we analysed the following formal features:

-Production year: from *Tom and Jerry* (1942) to *We Bare Bears* (2015). Only the first year of each series was taken as a reference in the analysis, which was categorised in decades for a better statistical analysis.

-Production company and nationality.

-Sex: Male or female, instead of woman or man, because some characters are animals.

-Protagonist type (male, female, several male protagonists, several female protagonists, or mixed) and type of physiognomy or species of the characters of the series (people, animals, or mixed).

-Age range: child, until puberty; teenager, differentiated by physical, psychological and social changes; young person, post puberty, college-age, not yet mature enough to face life as an adult would; adult, socially positioned, with work or family responsibilities; senior, retirees or elderly people dedicated to a homelier and family life.

-Colour of clothing, hair, eyes and skin.

-Profession or occupation.

Internet searches were carried out to study these variables in each series. Once all data were collected, they were analysed with SPSS (version 21 for Windows 32 bits). As most data were nominal, the statistical analysis was based on chi-square tests and the use of contingency tables and coefficients.

### **3. Analysis and results**

In all the analyses shown below, a  $p < .01$  was obtained with respect to the differences and relation between variables.

#### **3.1. Nationality**

The majority of the series are American productions (53.4%), followed by Japanese series (25.3%) and Spanish series (6.3%). It is worth mentioning the scarce presence of other countries (15%), which reflects the little variability and representation of other nationalities of Spanish television.

There are statistically significant differences depending on the decade in which they were premiered. The analysis shows that American productions only decayed in the 1970s due to the rise of Japanese productions.

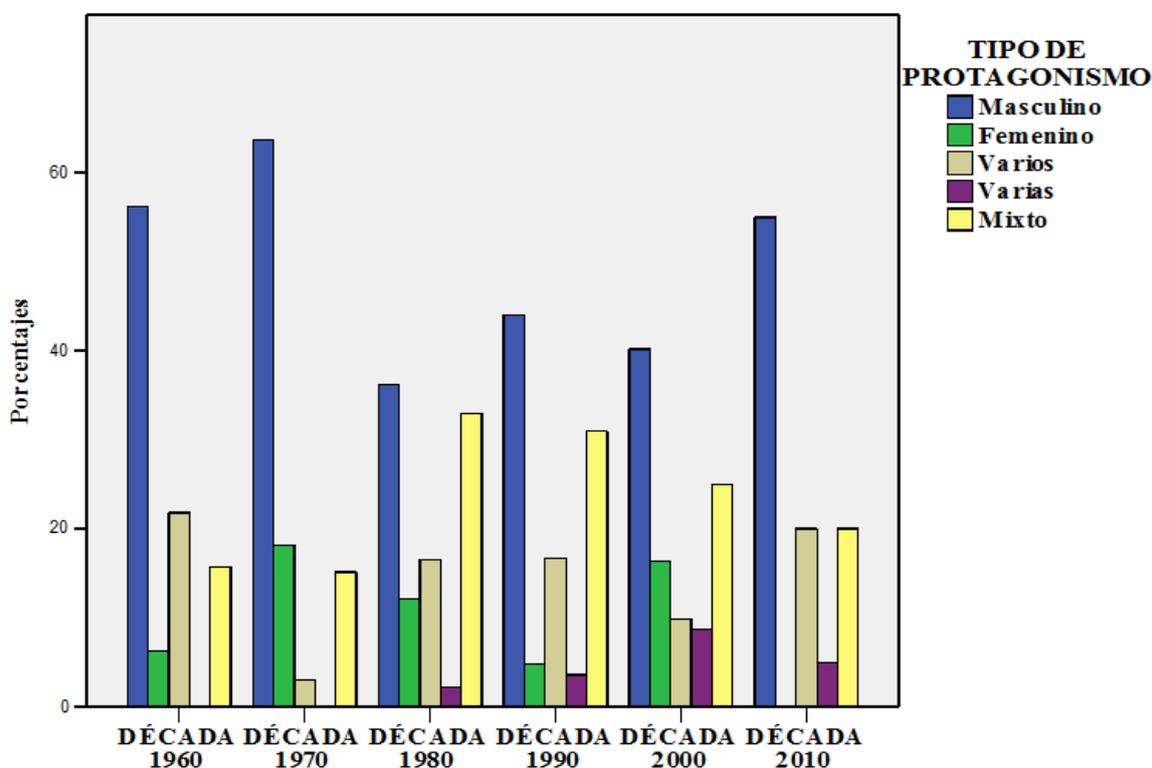
#### **3.2. Production company**

The analysis identified more than 120 different production companies and indicates that five of them have dominated over the others with 44% of the productions (Nickelodeon, Disney, Nippon Animation, Toei Animation and the merger between Hanna-Barbera and Cartoon Network). In the 1970s Japanese productions become most influential, leaving the 114 remaining production companies (including co-productions) sharing 56% of the schedules.

#### **3.3. Type of protagonism**

There are significant differences across decades (Figure 1). Crossing this variable with nationality, Japanese productions feature females to a greater extent than American series (24.7% and 10.1%, respectively), whereas the Spanish productions are characterized for having more series led by both male and females (40.9%).

Figure 1: Type of protagonist throughout the years



### 3.4. Age

In the early years, adults dominated as protagonists, but this changed for the benefit of teens and young people in the last two decades (55% vs 20% of adult characters). In addition, there are no elderly people in the leading roles.

### 3.5. Profession or occupation

In relation to the changes detected in the variable age, there was an increase of characters whose occupation is student (40% in the last two decades), whereas in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the predominant roles were housewife (9.3%), pet (9.3%) and superhero (11.6%). The proportion of the latter role increased to 20% of all the characters analysed in each of the last three decades.

In turn, there are significant differences in terms of nationality: for example, Japanese series advocate more than other nationalities to include characters dedicated to sports (14%) or academic activities (25.1%), while American productions are more inclined to focus on superheroes (25.8%).

In addition, there is a relationship between the sex of the character and the occupation: female characters are the only sex that play the role of housewife (4.7%) and play the role of student almost three times more than males characters do (31.5% vs 12%, respectively). However, males beat females in playing the role of superheroes (24.5% and 16.7%, respectively).

### **3.6. Physiognomy**

The analysis shows that from the 1970s there was an increase in the series composed only by humans (45% in average), although the proportion is similar to animations composed by humans and animals (mixed).

Some differences found in the chronology are due to nationality, where Japanese series, which predominate in the 1970s, have been characterised by employing humans (52.8%) to the detriment of animals (9%).

It is also important to take into account that more than 80% of female characters are people, while the male population is equitably distributed into humans and animals (54.9% and 45.1%, respectively).

Finally, the crossing of this variable with profession/occupation shows that human characters are mostly students or superheroes (27.7% and 25.1% respectively); while animal characters have a greater diversity of professions and undetermined occupations, including pet, which can only be given to this type of characters, which are mainly configured as anthropomorphic animals.

### **3.7. Chromatism**

This section shows the different results in the use of colour in characters' eyes, hair, skin and clothing. It is pertinent to emphasise that in the cases corresponding to clothes and hair, colours are not usually unique, but a mixture, making it more difficult to categorise them in specific colours.

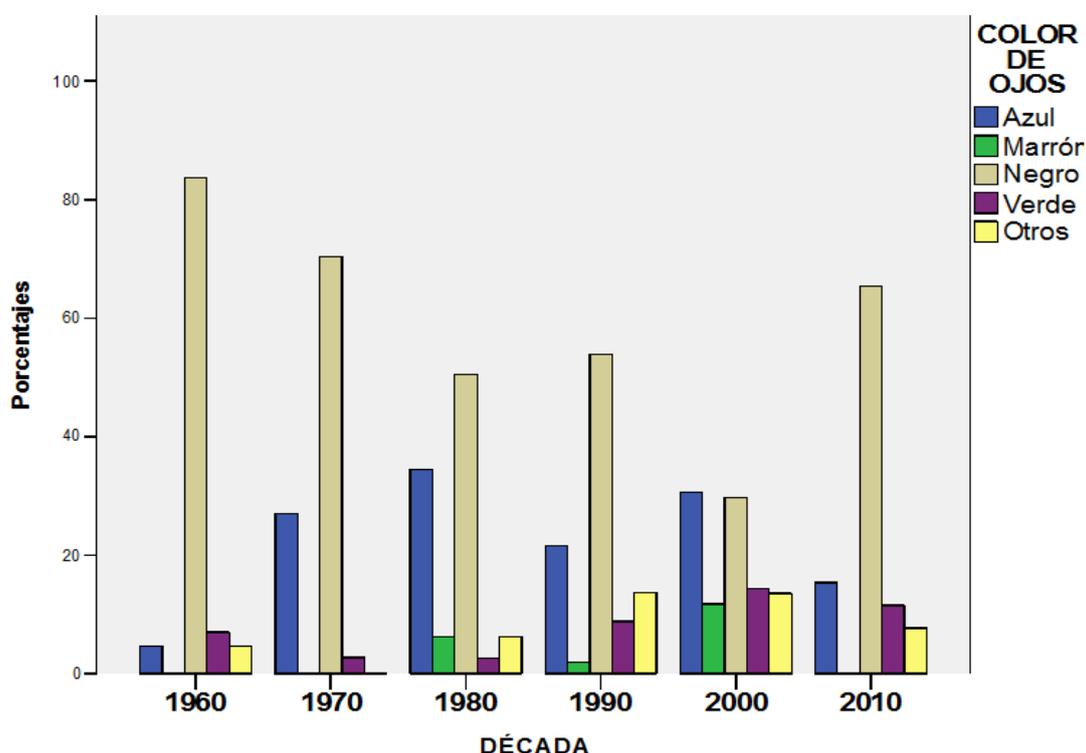
#### **3.7.1. Eyes**

There are significant differences across decades, which shows how the variability of colours has been increasing over the years (Figure 2).

There are also variations depending on the nationality of the series. The colour of the characters' eyes would not represent the social reality of the country to which the animation belongs, as in the case of Japan, where the most used colour is blue (38%), which is the least representative colour of the Japanese population's eyes. On the other hand, Black would be colour used the most by Americans (54.3%) and, to a greater extent, by Spanish productions (80.6%).

While, as mentioned, the passage of time increased the representation of teen and young characters, the analysis shows that in these age groups blue eyes are predominant (40% approximately), in comparison with adults and children, in which black is the more common eye colour (60%).

**Figure 2: Colour of the eyes throughout the years**



In turn, there is a relationship according to the sex of the character: females use more the blue colour and with greater chromatic heterogeneity compared to males, whose dominant eye colour is black.

**Table 1. Relation between the character eye colour and sex and species**

Eye colour	Sex		Species	
	Male	Female	Humans	Animals
Blue	17.9%	35.6%	29.7%	17.1%
Brown	3.8%	6.8%	7.3%	0.7%
Black	65.9%	34.0%	43.7%	68.7%
Green	5.0%	12.1%	9.0%	6.4%
Other	7.4%	11.5%	10.3%	7.1%

Source: Authors' own creation.

Finally, similar results are found depending on whether the characters are human or animal, the latter being the type that uses black the most.

### 3.7.2. Skin

The most predominant skin colour throughout all decades has been white (60%). Depending on nationality, there is a somewhat more consistent representation than in the case of eye colour. 77% of Japanese characters are white-skinned, while only 55% of American and Spaniard characters have this skin colour. However, American and Spaniard series have more characters with brown skin (16%) than the oriental series (6%).

There are differences depending on age: adults have more chromatic heterogeneity (41.3% are white-skinned and 17.5% brown-skinned), while young people, teens and children are more commonly white-skinned (70.7%, 85% and 63.2%, respectively).

In relation to the sex and skin colour of the character, it was observed that female characters are more characterised by the white colour (74.4%) than their male counterparts (49.1%), which show more diversity of chromatic nuances.

Finally, there are differences depending on whether the characters are animals or people: it has been verified that to characterise humans the favourite colour is white (82.4%), while in animals the use of various chromatic sources is normalised (only 14.9% have white skin).

### 3.7.3. Hair

It has been observed that over the years the variety and mixture of colours used has increased. In addition, the increase in yellow and the lesser use of black is notorious (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Colour of hair throughout the years**

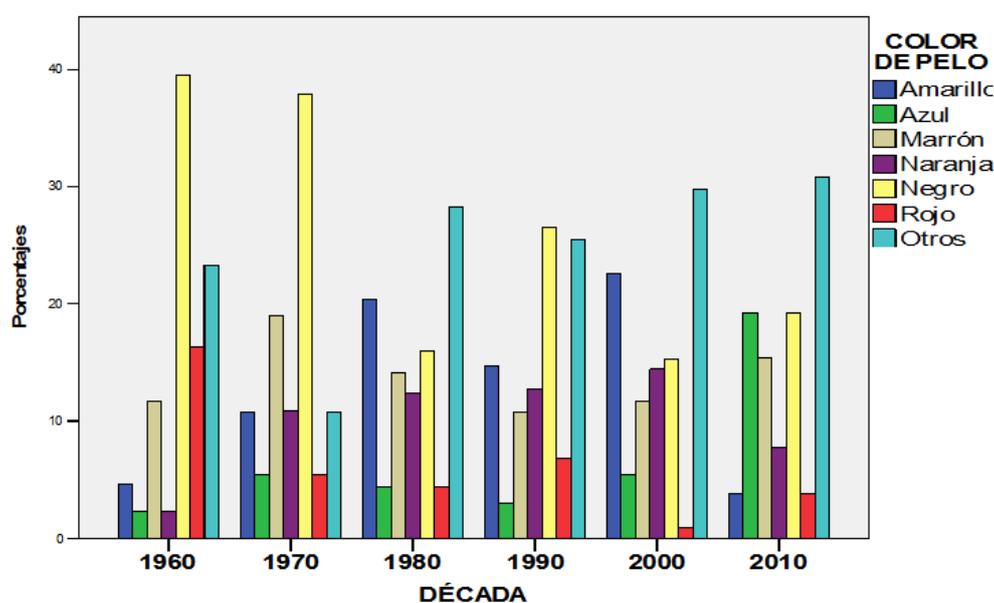
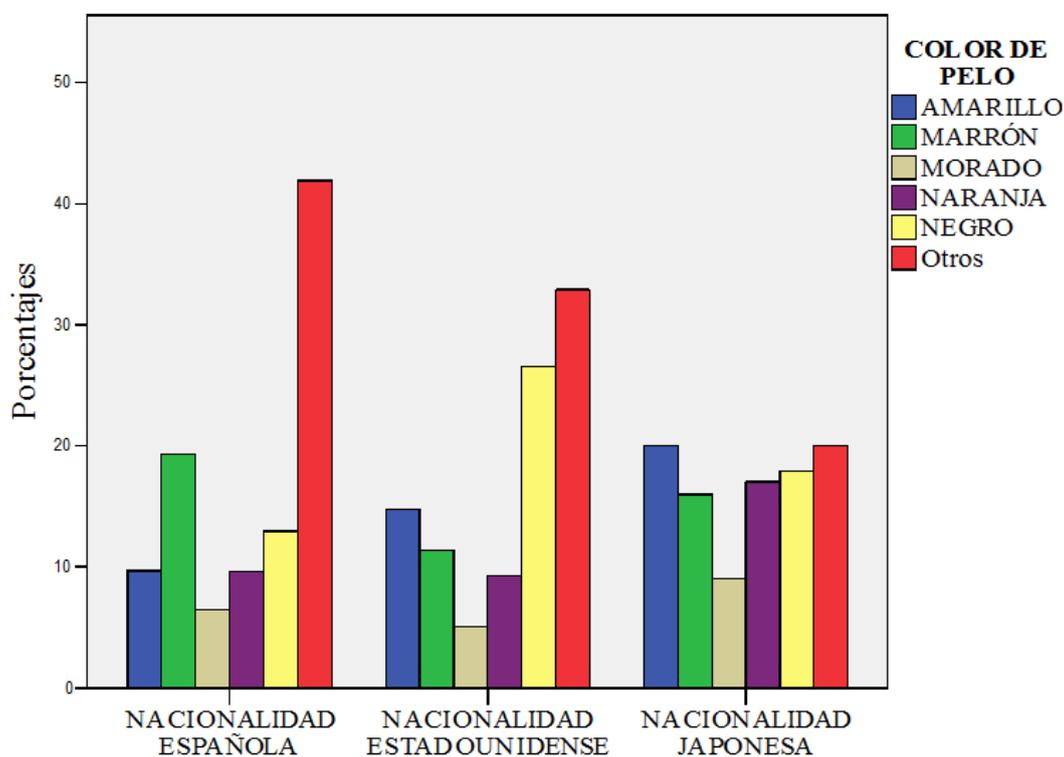


Figure 4: Colour of hair according to the nationality



The analysis by nationalities indicates that Japanese series prefer yellow to a greater extent, although blond is an unusual colour in Japanese society (Figure 4).

After failing to find important differences with respect to the characters' age and hair colour, it was observed that female characters use more blond (24.1%), orange (15.2%) and purple (7.9%) with respect to their male counterparts (10%, 8.7% and 3.7%, respectively), who use more the colours black (27.3%) and brown (15.4%) than female characters (16.7% and 9.9%, respectively). This factor also makes the proportion of people using yellow (19.7%) to be greater than the share of characters characterised as animals (9.2%), because more than 80% of female characters are people. To this we must add that the use of humans has been more typical of Japanese productions (52.8%), whose characters have blond hair to a greater extent.

### 3.7.4. Clothing

It was observed that the number of characters that wear no clothes has been declining over the years, due in part to the increase in the use of humans to the detriment of animals. Depending on the age, the characters that do not wear clothes the most are adults (29.4%), but this is also associated with the fact

that half of them are animals and 49.6% of these characters do not wear any clothing. However, the colour of the clothes is mostly composed of a mixture of various shades.

After failing to find important differences according to nationality, there are variations depending on sex, being the pink colour more characteristic of female characters (13% compared to 0.8% in male characters). Interestingly, blue is also more representative of female characters (11.5%) than male characters (8.7%), thus breaking with the idea that blue is associated more with males, although pink would continue to be typical of females.

Also significant is the fact that nudity is presented as something more uncharacteristic of the female sex (6.2% compared to 26.1% in male characters that do not wear any clothes).

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

The study has shown that there was a constant production of almost 90 animated series per decade since the 1980s. Moreover, more than half of the 352 children's animated series were American productions, which dominated throughout the history of Spanish television, except in the 1970s, when they were surpassed by Japanese series.

The fact that only five production companies are responsible for almost 50% of the production of animated series, allows us to affirm that there is a US and Japanese duopoly in the cultural production and industry, which would very much limit the diversity of this kind of content for children.

Thus, there is un turn a cultural bias and a framing of the view offered by the different productions, both in form and content, existing significant differences in the sex of the protagonists according to the nationality of production during the analysed period.

From a theoretical point of view, it is understood that the inclusion or exclusion of these children's productions in Spanish television, would be determined by both the production companies and by the television channels, setting a particular agenda according to their interests, which would favour American and Japanese productions. In turn, the framing effect (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) would also be determined by the people working for these companies and institutions, who would be responsible for shaping the contents.

Finally, the treatment of the series will favour certain cultivation effect in the audience, which is especially relevant in the case of the child audience, who is the most vulnerable (Sahuquillo, 2007), especially considering the number of hours that children spend in front of television and the uses and gratifications related to it. In short, the scarce variety in terms of production and nationality can be determinants to understand the mainstream view that children would build through the consumption of cartoons produced mostly by two cultural markets, as well as the consequent cultivation effect that it will have in the way they understand their reality.

The production companies that have been analysed here are strongly related to their nationality and, therefore, to very strong contexts of cultural identity such as the American and Japanese contexts. The effects on the audience would come largely determined by the national origin of the production, which

favours certain guidelines about what is said, the shape and aesthetics of the drawings and, consequently, the cultivation effects on the audience.

After proving that children are permeable to acquire and integrate the explicit and implicit messages of animated series through audiovisual consumption (Maraver & Aguaded, 2014; Medrano, 2006; Río, Álvarez & Río, 2004), it is consequently relevant to investigate the narrative, framing, message, and treatment contained in these drawings as well as their evolution over time. The results of this research have shown significant developments in some variables, such as the increased representation of young and teen leading characters to the detriment of adult characters, and the prevalence of basic and non-representative colours in the aesthetic design of characters.

On the other hand, the intrinsic features of the child audience must be examined as children are considered to be a public of special interest with particularities that differentiate them from other target groups. However, despite production companies are aware of this fact when designing cartoons, we cannot forget that although the series are aimed at children, they have been made by adults, and that the child audience has a different cultural construct on discrimination than adults, and are in the process of development through the consumption of cultural contents which must be analysed accordingly in their diversity and “health”.

The child audience does not have the same cultural perception of audiovisual products than adults, so that their cultural indicators should not be measured with equal intensity, nor the cultivation of attitudes or behaviours is so predictable in these cases. Audiovisual producers and its consequent programming in television must pay attention to communication professionals, pedagogues and psychologists so that their products take into account education in values and not only focus on marketing and/or product profitability. Public and private television operators in Spain must safeguard and protect children by offering them a diverse, healthy, educational, formative, stereotype-free audiovisual diet, and to present women and citizens in their diversity and cultural extension. American and Japanese productions, which are predominant in the period under analysis, do not seem to have enough “quality” for the audiovisual diet necessary for young audiences.

The testing of the hypotheses shows that there have been significant programmatic biases in the animated television series aimed at the youngest sectors of the Spanish public in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This fact leads us to reflect on the influence of these audiovisual products in the construction of the reality of Spanish children, which would integrate as normal certain narrative configurations that they consume in animated series, like the fact that men are protagonists or that old people hardly intervene. If they consume audiovisual products that “alter” social reality, their audiovisual diet can be harmful to their health because it is not “balanced”.

This research has demonstrated the existence of a tendential relation between these narrative configurations and the nationality or production year of the series, and has determined that animated television series for children contain an important cultural and even ideological bias in the period analysed. This fact can be seen clearly in Japanese productions’ use of eye and hair colours that are little representative of the oriental reality. Thus, the physical composition of their heroes and heroines would not represent the young Japanese viewers. Therefore, this factor is of great relevance if one

wishes to improve the criterion of representativeness to match the composition of characters of animated characters with their context in which they are produced and broadcast.

The influence of the media on cultural teaching and learning processes is undeniable. The gatekeepers of television programming who set out which audiovisual products are more available and consumed massively, must select an “audiovisual food basket” full of cultural, diverse, balanced and responsible products.

Therefore, education on media consumption and “intelligent” use of audiovisual communication is required to make sure citizens rationalise consumption, and are aware of the messages they receive, their social contributions and their personal gratifications (Aguaded, 1996). This audiovisual education must be transferred to all citizens for them to learn to pay special attention to the seduction of production companies and programmers and be able to take care of the audiovisual health of children. If the market proposes the under-representation of women or certain age segments, it should be corrected. The obligation of the expert is, first, to detect incidents, then to spread awareness of it in a critical and constructive way and, finally, to try to influence regulators in an extensive sense of the word, as well as gatekeepers so that they do not stuff the smallest members of the family with an unbalanced audiovisual diet. The audiovisual and therefore cultural health of the next generations is at stake.

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