

Do children want skinny cartoon characters?

Test of kids' preferences for different body shapes

Girl and women characters in animation programmes are sexualised (see Herche/Götz in this issue). The implicit assumption of the television industry is simply that this is what girls and boys want. "After all, this is proven by the sales of Barbie", as one US-American producer commented. But is this really the case or merely a self-fulfilling prophecy? Do sexualised female characters appeal to children?

Attractiveness research among adults

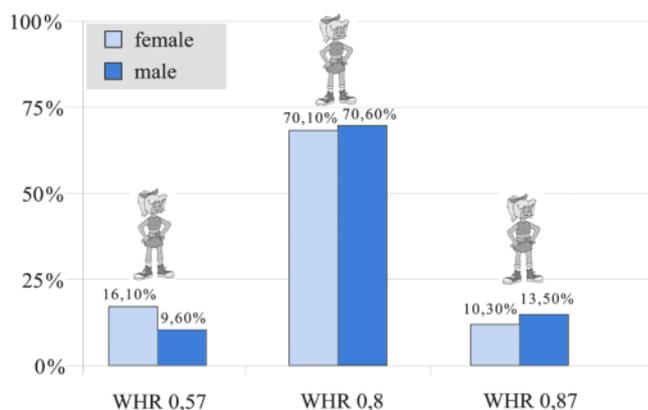
Research on attractiveness, the systematic study into universal criteria of human beauty, looks into the generally valid features of an attractive body. For this purpose, in the 1990s the "waist-to-hip ratio" (WHR) was introduced into the discussion as a measure of attractiveness. In various tests adults were presented with different drawings or manipulated photos of women in bikinis (or men in underpants) and asked to spontaneously assess the attractiveness of each model. The results tend to define an attractive WHR on a scale of 0.68 to 0.7 (cf. Henss, 2000). Indeed, at least according to this study, adult men do find photo models with a pronounced waistline attractive. But does this also apply to children? Scientific research data on what is attractive to children is not yet available and thus results cannot be applied to cartoon characters on television. This is where the IZI takes the initiative and tests, using 2 television characters, what body shapes appeal to boys and girls.

The study: Which body shape do children prefer?

First of all, a well-known and popular character was sought whose detailed outline and physical shape was somewhat obscured by loose clothes. The prototype of a character with such a positive connotation and without a well-defined physique is Bibi Blocksberg (see ill. 1). She has been one of the most well-received characters on public television in Germany for years and always wears (in the original version) a green baggy T-shirt which hides her exact physical shape. However, in a less well-known book she miraculously conjured up "cool clothes", to celebrate her birthday, with a mini-skirt and a skimpy, above-the-waist top. In this instance the publishers gave Bibi Blocksberg a WHR of 0.8, thus the proportions typical of a child or young girl. We used this comparatively unfamiliar image to create 2

additional variants of it by modifying only the waist line. One version has a WHR of 0.57, thus a distinctly sexualised waist, and another version a value of 0.87, thus a slightly chubby version of Bibi.

We proceeded similarly with the character of a young woman: Cloe from *Bratz* (see ill. 2). Originally, this character has a waist-to-hip ratio of 0.55 and thus counts among the most sexualised young women characters on children's television. We modified



Ill. 3: 3 versions of Bibi and the respective percentages of girls and boys who would prefer these

her figure giving her an ideal natural feminine profile with a WHR of 0.71 and a much less sexualised waist with a value of 0.86.

We then went on to present these 3 versions of Bibi and Cloe to a sample of 1,055 representatively selected children between the ages of 3 and 12 who were asked to specify in face-to-face interviews which of the characters they liked best.¹

Which body shape do kids prefer in a girl character?

88 % of the respondents were familiar with Bibi Blocksberg, and the result was surprisingly clear: 70 % of girls and boys preferred the original version of Bibi with a WHR of 0.8 (see ill. 3). Of the 30 % who had picked one of the other 2 versions boys preferred the chubby Bibi while a greater percentage of girls went for the “sexualised Bibi”. The younger ones (3 to 8 years old) preferred the less waist-accentuated character version, while the latter did not appeal to the 11- to 12-year-olds so much. The overall tendency, thus, is unequivocal: Bibi Blocksberg is fine just the way she is! The acceptance of the original version even increases with age.

Which body shape do kids prefer in a young woman's character?

40 % of children are familiar with Cloe from *Bratz*, a programme which was only recently introduced in Ger-

many and is broadcast on SuperRTL. Girls are 19 % more familiar with this series than boys and familiarity increases significantly with age. Children were shown the 3 versions of Cloe, each only with a different waistline. The out-

come was that 62 % of children prefer her body shape at 0.7 WHR, which, compared to the original, is the less waist-accentuated version. Among those who chose the unsexualised hips the percentage of boys is again higher, while after all 20 % of girls between 11 and 12 years prefer the original version, and the ones knowing the character accept the sexualised thin version more. The majority of children, however, can do without the unnaturally slim waist of 0.55 WHR. This desexualisation would be particularly more appealing to boys.

Conclusion

Naturally, this study can only represent an initial start. However, results appear to point very clearly in one direction, namely children's non-preference of low WHRs, that is to say “wasp waists”. They tend to search for, at least according to our test, more natural body proportions. Thus, in the case of child characters such as Bibi Blocksberg, a child or young girl figure with a WHR of 0.8 and in the case of a young woman character, such as Cloe from *Bratz*, a value of 0.7 which would be the equivalent of a slim, ideal figure.

In the light of the programmes offered on children's TV channels the finding is quite strong, since it indicates that the omnipresent hyper-sexualised female bodies are not only problematic from an educational point of view, but also that they are not even want-

ed by children themselves (see also on this topic children's criticism in Bulla/Herche in this issue).

Boys' selection is noteworthy, since they could be shown significantly to prefer more chubby figures. This is in line with the findings of boys studies which revealed that as children (up until the age of 13) boys appreciate less sexualised body shapes and have a less skinny ideal figure of girls and women in mind than they have of themselves. Boys, thus, have a substantially different evaluation of attractiveness than adult men.

Another typical finding is the discovery that at the age of 11 to 12 years the number of girls who would opt for a hyper-sexualised figure rises to 20 %. This corresponds with research findings from girls studies, since it is on average at the age of 11 that girls in Germany have their first menstruation. Girls' bodies transform and this is the beginning of an increasingly critical stance whereby girls perceive their bodies as “ugly” and often “too fat”. Precisely for these girls an attractive character of a young woman such as Cloe from *Bratz*, whose body shape is not hyper-sexualised, would be educationally and psychologically desirable. ■

NOTE

¹ Conducted by iconkids & youth, Germany, between March and April 2008. The directives to the children followed those used in the studies conducted with adults: “Take a look at these 3 images of Bibi Blocksberg/Cloe. They look quite similar, but please tell me spontaneously, without thinking too much about it, which image you like best.”

REFERENCE

Henss, Ronald (2000). *Waist-to-hip ratio and female attractiveness. Evidence from photographic stimuli and methodical considerations*. In: *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 501-513.

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