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“This is the TV presenter I’d like to have”

If children could make up their favourite learning companion

A study among 24 countries ascertained children’s preferred learning companion for knowledge programmes.

Formative studies on knowledge shows have demonstrated the importance of the presenter of a programme. He or she is often the figure the child in front of the television can relate to, offering an entry point to the learning space and a connection to the content. The presenter is, so to speak, the “learning companion”, and therefore very important in terms of how viewers relate to the content, how successfully they learn, and how popular the show itself is. It is therefore essential to carefully choose a target-group-specific person as a learning companion. Research has given clear hints that TV characters of the same sex and ethnic background are often preferred by children as their favourite characters (cf. Götz, 2010). Who would they prefer as a presenter in knowledge-centred shows?

In the period from February 2012 to April 2012, in 24 countries – Germany, Argentina, Cuba, the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil, India, Thailand, Turkey, the Philippines, Slovenia, Romania, the Netherlands, Italy, Pakistan, Nepal, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, and Egypt – 2,839 children aged between 7 and 10, roughly half boys and half girls, filled in a standardised quantita-

tive, age-appropriate questionnaire. It consisted of one page on which the children described their imagined ideal TV presenter (sex, age, hair, skin, and eye colour, body shape, glasses/no glasses, ethnic group), and another page on which they described themselves using the same categories.

The ideal learning companion

Same gender, young adult or adolescent of normal weight

We asked children: what should the presenter of a children’s television show be like? What sort of person would you like to investigate something new with, something that’s really fun? The answer: 84 % of the girls wanted a female presenter, 85 % of the boys a male person as a learning companion. The majority of children wants a presenter of the same gender as themselves.

As far as age is concerned, 1 in 3 children wanted a young adult and 1 out of 4 said the ideal host would be adolescent. Children or older adults as learning companions were also mentioned, but with under 20 % less often. The wishes diverged when it came to hair and eye colour, and when it came to body shape; most children would prefer a presenter of normal weight. Extremely thin presenters were favoured by a smaller group. Slightly fatter or overweight figures were mentioned only in exceptional cases (see below).

Should the presenter look like the child (as he/she perceives him-/herself)?

The children assessed themselves with regard to their appearance, and the answers were statistically compared to the statements they made about their ideal learning companion. The results are relatively clear in some areas: children predominantly want learning companions of the same gender, but somewhat older than themselves. Boys tend to want an older learning companion, while half of the girls surveyed would like to have a child or adolescent as ideal presenter.

Hair colour: the same colour would be appreciated by most children – red-haired children are not sure

The ideal image of the presenter varies when it comes to hair colour. Roughly half of the children with black, blond, or brown hair would like learning companions with the same hair colour as themselves. Only for red-haired children does the proportion wishing to see red-haired presenters decrease, to 1 out of 4.

Eye colour: blue-eyed children would like to see the same colour – green-eyed children are not sure

When it comes to eye colour, over 2 thirds of the children with blue eyes want the presenter to have the same eye colour. Around half of children with brown, black, or grey eyes also express the wish to have a presenter

with the same eye colour. So most of the children would like the ideal presenter have their eye colour – but they are open to all other colours, too. There is, however, one exception: among the green-eyed children, only 1 in 4 children want their learning companion to have the same eye colour.

Body shape: slim or normal weight – obese children would like to see an obese presenter

Most of the children describe themselves as slim or of normal weight, and want a presenter with the same body shape. Only a third of children who perceive themselves as extremely thin want presenters with the same body shape as themselves, and a greater proportion would prefer a presenter with a more normal weight. Children who categorise themselves as chubby/overweight tend to wish for a learning companion who is thinner than they are. Among children who classify themselves as very overweight (obese), the desire for a very overweight learning companion is over-represented.

Skin colour: children who perceive themselves as light-skinned imagine a presenter of the same colour, darker-skinned children are not so sure

Children stated their self-perceived skin colour on a skin colour scale – and indicated where their preferred learning companion would be on the scale. Children who state that they have a light skin colour also want this skin colour for their ideal learning companion.

Children considering themselves as darker-skinned want to see TV presenters either with the same skin colour as themselves or with lighter skin colour. When it comes to the ones who identified their own skin as dark or black skin, only 2 fifths could imagine their ideal learning companion to have this skin colour. The other children wish to have presenters with lighter skin than themselves.

Ethnic background: the majority of the children would prefer the same “kind of appearance” – but Blacks and South Asians are not so sure

We also wanted to tackle the issue of typical facial features, skin colours etc. – something normally called “ethnic background”. Approaching this issue is anything but simple. After a lot of pre-tests, we decided to offer the children 6 groups with 6 photos of all ages each representing variations of typical inhabitants of the respective world region. The children were asked to choose their ideal presenter out of these groups and to decide in which group they thought they would fit in.

Overall, the majority of the children chose ideal presenters of the group they put themselves into. Among the children who considered themselves as “Caucasian/White”, a clear share of 2 thirds express a desire for a presenter of the same ethnic background. The same share could be found among Asian kids.²

For children who classify themselves as “Latin” or “South European/Mid-Eastern”, the desire for a presenter with the same ethnic background decreases to slightly less than half of the children. This share diminishes even more when it comes to girls and boys who describe themselves as “South East Asian” (1 in 4) or “Black” (1 in 3).

Summary

These initial results show a clear tendency: most children would like a person of the same gender as an ideal learning companion, somewhat older than them – but still “young”.

When aspects of appearance are broken down further, the tendency to want to see one’s own appearance reflected in one’s learning companion is still apparent, but with more variations. The evidence tends to confirm the impression that there are some characteristics, such as blue eyes, blond hair, slim figure, and light(er) skin colour, which seem to be closer to a socially created ideal, and that

children with these attributes more often want to see the same attributes in their ideal presenter. If children perceive themselves as having other external characteristics, such as dark skin colour, excess weight, green eyes, and red hair, they less often want a presenter who resembles them. This, however, can also be interpreted in terms of their self-assessment.

The backgrounds for this are very complex, and are closely related to a socially-defined ideal, which is, not least, reinforced by children’s TV. It seems likely that children in some countries know fewer positively-viewed TV presenters with darker skin, overweight, and of non “Caucasian-white” appearance, and therefore have trouble imagining that an attractive presenter could look like that.

A good starting point for boosting quality in children’s TV: presenters, male and female, whose appearance and physicality reflect the diversity which actually exists within their country. ■

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NOTES

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² Since the study did not take place in East Asian countries, the answering children are likely to be part of a minority group who would like to see an Asian presenter.

REFERENCE

Götz Maya (2010): “Black, White, or Turkish?” In: *TelevIZion*, vol. 23, no. E, pp. 16-19.