

How children negotiate their identity development with television

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This article describes the most common ways in which children use television to negotiate their identity. It highlights the opportunities but also the problems this can entail.

“And then the film told me, there’s a lot more to me”, says 10-year-old Leonie about her experience of watching a film that led to her subsequent transformation of her self-definition, her appearance, and her behaviour – a clear case that the reception of a single film caused a significant leap in the development of how a child defines her identity.

Identity means, among other things, knowing oneself, recognising all one’s different facets, talents and weaknesses, understanding the various roles one plays, and assessing oneself as realistically as possible. This process of self-definition, identity making, or identity formation always takes place in line with the society, people, values, etc. surrounding the individual (Cote & Levine, 2002) – a complex reciprocal relationship for which a number of different theories provide a number of different theoretical concepts (see vom Orde in this issue).

Children grow up in a world in which the values of their respective relevant culture are objectified in language, institutions, rituals, etc. (“objectification”) (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Media which children encounter and think about in their everyday lives also form part of this objectification. In particu-

lar, television, or TV content children use via various devices provides the symbolic material for their identity formation. This is always an active process of selection, interpretation, and appropriation in which children not only form their own identity, but also, through their concerns and demands, shape the market and hence too the content they are offered (Bachmair, 1996).

In order to understand the process of identity formation and the role TV content plays in it, it is necessary to be open to the perspective of children and adolescents, to listen to them and understand how they make meaning of such media content. For instance, Leonie who was mentioned above, was long dissatisfied with her situation and could not reconcile her interests and what was important to her with the idea of “being a girl”. In the German film *The Wild Soccer Bunch* (*Die wilden Kerle*) she finally saw a female character with similar concerns who found a way to position herself as a wild girl within a group of wild boys.

The impact of film reception and how it contributes to children’s identity negotiation is not always as obvious as in the case of Leonie. It is often a number of small moments that children use for their self-definition, presentation, and comparison with other people of significance to them. The most typical forms of identity negotiation on a small scale are examined in the following pragmatic summary. For a more detailed theoretical approach see

the book *TV Hero(in)es of Boys and Girls* (Götz, 2014), in which most of the examples covered below are published, unless bibliographical references indicate otherwise.

IDENTITY FORMATION DURING RECEPTION

Identification – connecting characters

In everyday speech the word “identification” is often used to describe various kinds of relationships with a media character. Liebes & Katz (1990) summarise liking, similarity, and modelling under the term “identification”, and Sonia Livingstone summed it up as “taking on someone else’s point of view” (Livingstone, 1998) which aptly describes how children frequently deal with a figure who is of central importance to them. It is usually the protagonist who becomes the connecting character. Children imagine themselves in his/her position and accompany him/her throughout the story (Ill. 1). In well-made informative programmes this is the host, with whom they research something and whom they join on a journey of discovery (Schlote, 2012). In fictional programmes it is often a child character in whom they recognise themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and who gives them a good feeling as they follow the story. The prototypical example of this is a programme that has been one of the

most successful in the world for over a decade: *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

SpongeBob's fundamentally positive attitude and his energetic, never deliberately malicious nature mirrors a typical way children approach the world. Through SpongeBob they can experience what joys but also what mistakes such an attitude to life can entail. The humour that goes hand in hand with everything, even every failure, offers them the chance to consider their own experiences without fear of humiliation. For one thing is always clear: as stupidly, naively and obviously wrongly as SpongeBob acts, the funny loser always emerges as the winner. That makes him an ideal connecting character, particularly for boys but also for a number of girls (Götz, 2014, Götz et al., 2012).

and save the world from villains. They seldom imagine themselves in the role of the boy Ron Stoppable, the Stupid Sidekick in the series, but he does fulfil an important function with regard to identity negotiation. For although Ron is usually unable to do his job, Kim does not devalue him for it. This creates opportunities for children to "take a look" at moments in which they were not up to the task and to integrate them as a part of their identity.

The prerequisites of a connecting character are: similar values and goals to the child in front of the screen, a story which is consistently narrated from

projections of individual elements of identity onto television characters. In programmes that feature many different characters, such as *Pokémon* or *The Smurfs*, there is typically a splitting of identification, i. e. children find aspects of their own character traits in the programme.

9-year-old Victoria, for example, knows every *Pokémon* character. Above all she likes Butterfree, Snorlax, Vileplume and Mew. She likes Mew because it is gentle and yet very strong, just like her, Butterfree because it can fly – she would like to be able to do that herself – and Vileplume because it is so beautiful, and aesthetics are also very important to her. She especially has a lot of fun with Snorlax, a very greedy and sleepy Pokémon. She too likes to lie in and enjoys being lazy from time to time, which her single mother does not like however. Each of her favourite *Pokémon* characters symbolises a part of her. However, she talks about the figure of Snorlax most, since he stands for the fact that is also okay to be less active now and again and to enjoy the part of oneself that loves relaxation. In this way Victoria can unconsciously confirm her feeling that these sides of herself are not completely "wrong" and have to be suppressed (Götz et al., 2005).

A further programme in which appropriation of this division of the self into various characters (split identification) becomes particularly evident is Disney's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (Ill. 2). In Tigger, preschool children recognise their own energetic sides and can intellectually value and act upon them. Eeyore shows that it is perfectly fine and decidedly touching if one does not always grasp everything, while Piglet makes it possible to recognise one's fearful, risk-averse sides as part of the whole. Viewed analytically, the characters in Disney's *Winnie-the-Pooh* are devised as the different parts of the self. It is actually one person, one self, that undergoes the adventure and reaches a successful solution via the collaboration of all parts. This offers room for identity negotiation in which children can recognise, in idealised form, the various sides to themselves and appreciate them.

The prerequisites on the part of the media: strong character types that

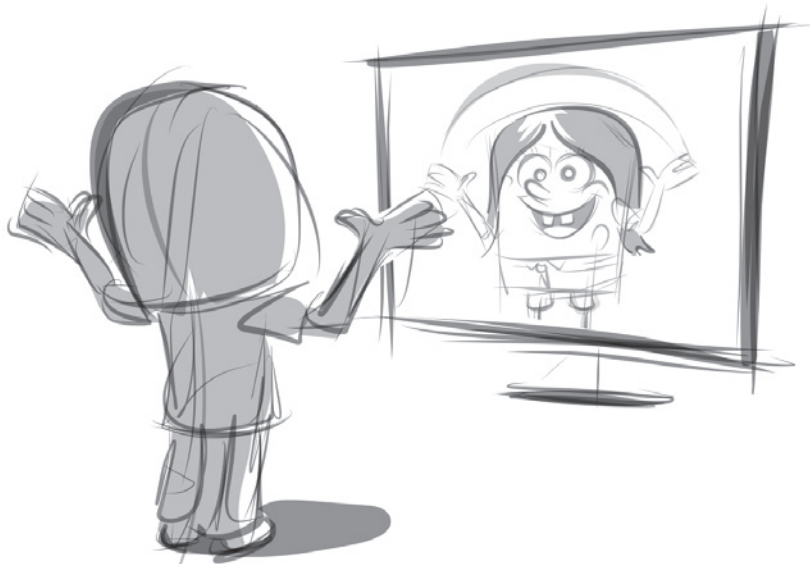


Illustration: Hansi Heller © ZI

Ill. 1: One of the most typical forms of reception: children "identify" with one of the main characters and put themselves in their position in the story

In this type of identity negotiation, media figures become significant others in whom children recognise an idealised version of themselves. Whenever possible, children choose protagonists of the same gender as themselves as connecting characters. But it is also quite common to put oneself in the place of a character of the opposite gender if that character embodies one's own ideals. For instance, a number of boys put themselves in the position of Disney's Kim Possible. Together with her they experience action-packed adventures

the perspective of children and which sympathetically guides them through the story, but above all a fundamental appreciation of the typical behaviour and concerns of children.

Split identification

Along with this tendency to get emotionally and intellectually involved with one character and project undesirable traits onto the stupid sidekick figure or the antagonists children also make use of partial, usually short-lived



Illustration: Hansi Helle © ZI

Ill. 2: Split identification: children project their different sides of their personality onto characters

symbolise in exaggerated, but always appreciative, fashion typical characteristics of children or people.

Feeling moved by certain parts of the story

Sometimes it is not the characters that become part of identity negotiation, but certain parts of a story. It is often children’s own experiences that are mirrored here. Positive experiences such as success in a sports event or a successful performance can be relived and further developed in the imagination as part of their self-concept. Problematic experiences can resonate through media stories and in the ideal case scenario are thus integrated into the self more easily.

5-year-old Pascal talks about an episode of *SpongeBob* for the third time in a survey. Worms have eaten *SpongeBob*’s house and now he wants to move back in with his parents. His friend Patrick is heartbroken and clings to the car, wailing. Finally Pascal reveals the reason he finds this story so great: “(...) and Tim has left kindergarten, too (...) he was my very best friend”. When Pascal speaks of the (humorously exaggerated) pain

of Patrick, he is also talking about his own pain at this experience of separation. Here the symbolic material of the show creates a space that enables him to recognise what was previously unspeakable: his best friend is no longer there (Götz 2014, p. 262 ff.).¹

It is also often the case, however, that great fun is had through parts of a story in which people with power are denigrated. Particularly when children experience degradation and rejection in school or in their families, a scene in which a father is rendered powerless and made to look ridiculous or in which a teacher doesn’t have the last word can provide cathartic laughter. These are ways of creating an emotional balance, which is indeed the very basis of identity negotiation. For only a child that is not anxious and under great pressure can

appropriately integrate difficult experiences, for instance, into his or her self-image.

Parasocial interaction

A further typical form of identity formation with TV content is parasocial interaction (PSI). This term describes the phenomenon whereby during the act of reception, viewers feel directly addressed by the actors, even though the moderator is only talking into a camera and the audience is looking at a television set (e. g. Horton & Wohl, 1956, Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Forms of PSI often occur when protagonists look into the camera and directly address the children watching. Preschool children often respond to parasocial demands out loud, reply to questions, look for clues (*Blue’s Clues*), or repeat words if told to (*Dora the Explorer*), or sing along and join in with the actions (*JoNaLu*). For this form of active response, the text must provide a clear instruction for action. This can be explicit, as in *Dora the Explorer*, where Dora tells the children watch-

ing to repeat after her, or implicit, as in the *Teletubbies* or *Barney*, in which children feel encouraged to join in by the massive, round physicality of the characters, by the music, and by their dancing in a way that children are also able to.

Parasocial interaction is particularly significant for identity negotiation when it allows imaginary rehearsal. Television gives children the opportunity to envisage themselves in a situation and consider how they would have acted while remaining free from the actual pressure to act and the consequences (Teichert, 1973).

For many adolescent girls in Germany, *Germany’s Next Topmodel* is part of their identity formation. When candidates are set challenges, girls – and boys – consider how they would have acted had they been in the same position. Particularly in the case of borderline challenges, such as naked photo shoots and pictures with wild animals, they often draw the line: “Nude photo shoots. I only thought that I would never do something like that” (girl, age 16) – that describes her mental role playing and her self-definition through boundaries (Götz, 2014).

These are all forms of identity formation in which the media text is used to gain a better understanding of oneself, to find new concepts, and integrate experiences. Along with these short-term, often spontaneous forms of identity negotiation there are, however, forms of appropriation that go beyond the reception situation.

IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AFTER RECEPTION

Beyond reception, if television touches on children’s subjects, speaks to them and moves them emotionally, it can also make a more long-term contribution to concrete identity negotiation.

Parasocial relationship

Building on intensive parasocial interaction, it is also possible for long-term parasocial relationships to develop

(Levinson, 1975, Klimmt, Hartmann & Schramm, 2006). The media persona are perceived as friends and imagined as a part of the viewer's own social world (Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985, Rubin & Perse, 1987). Children imagine television characters as ideal teachers, fathers or mothers who understand, recognise and support, thereby compensating for, among other things, experienced deficits in reality. Sometimes television characters become imaginary companions.

11-year-old Sabine has long imagined a German shepherd dog, the protagonist in the detective series *Kommisar Rex*, as her companion, and can thereby compensate mentally, at least in the short term, for the lack of support from her mother, who is suffering from depression (Götz, 2014).

each other. He imagines how they fly past the windows of the school together, among other things. Every evening Robby reports to his imaginary dragon what it was like at school and who at school annoyed him again. "Should I burn him?" The dragon then calls, but Robby calms him down: "No, not today". Having the television character as an imaginary friend is a chance for Robby to process his daily experiences and to thereby integrate them into his self-image. The fantasy of having a powerful, oversized friend allows him to retain the idea of his own ability to act and to re-establish emotional balance after experiencing vilification (Götz et al., 2005).

The prerequisites in media texts for such helper friends are strong, clever, and above all reliable beings that always stick by their friends no matter what happens or how their friends treat them.

takes place, at the very latest, after the programme.

In conversations between mothers and daughters about the latest events in the daily soap, values, for example, are symbolically negotiated. Ostensibly, the question is merely about whether a protagonist is faithful or about his sexual behaviour with his girlfriend. There is often a lot more to such conversations however.

Through the example of the soap, mother and daughter discuss relationships between heterosexual partners and thus subjects about which they presumably would not have been able to speak directly. The conversation about the media thus creates a neutral in-between space that enables identity negotiation through conversation (Götz, 2003).

Within a peer group too, conversations about media are much more than about rehashing the content. In conversations about the events of yesterday's talent show, people of the same age compare their values and assessments. In schoolyard conversations on a current format such as *Big Brother* or *Pop Idol*, children negotiate what it means to be cool and successful (Götz & Gather, 2010). Through expert knowledge and support for or rejection of a given character, self-presentation and the creation of a hierarchy take place within a group of friends.

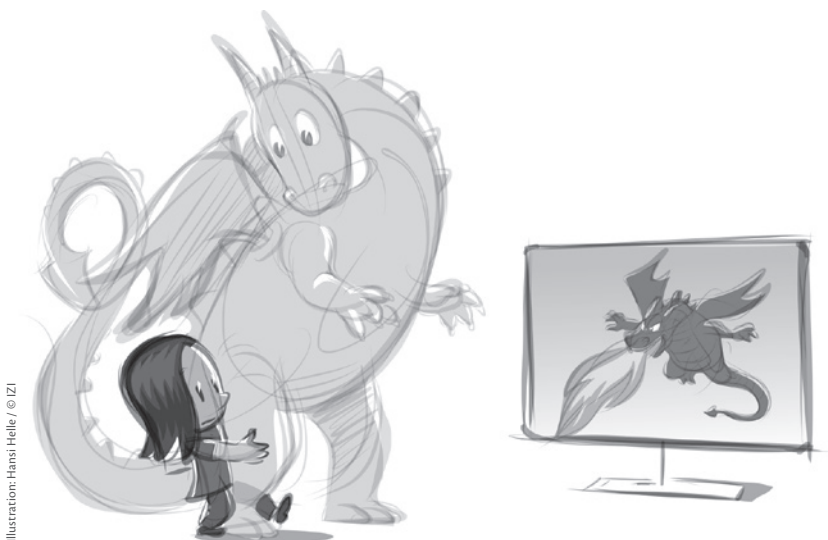


Illustration: Hansi Helle / © IZI

Ill. 3: Parasocial relationships: children imagine media figures as part of their everyday lives, e.g. as their best friends or protectors

Children want to develop further, understand circumstances and their own situation, and seek recognition and orientation. Their life-world cannot always offer them what they really need. Often people use their imagination to "keep going in spite of everything" and to make the best of a situation however difficult it might be (Ill. 3).

9-year-old Robby imagines the dragon from *Dragonheart* is his friend and lives in the cellar, and that they like each other and need

Identity negotiation in conversation

Identity negotiation via media is always part of a broader social context. The choice of media used by a child's family has a significant impact on identity negotiation. If reception occurs together with the family, meaning and values are often negotiated through comments on the action and on individual characters. Identity negotiation always

THE CONSEQUENCES OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THROUGH MEDIA

When children enter into a rather intensive relationship with a television character, they imagine parasocial relationships, process their own experiences through fragments of media stories, or regulate their emotional equilibrium, and use media to communicate and compare values with friends and parents. When media images become part of people's internal representations, they shape their action and interpretative patterns (Bachmair, 1996).

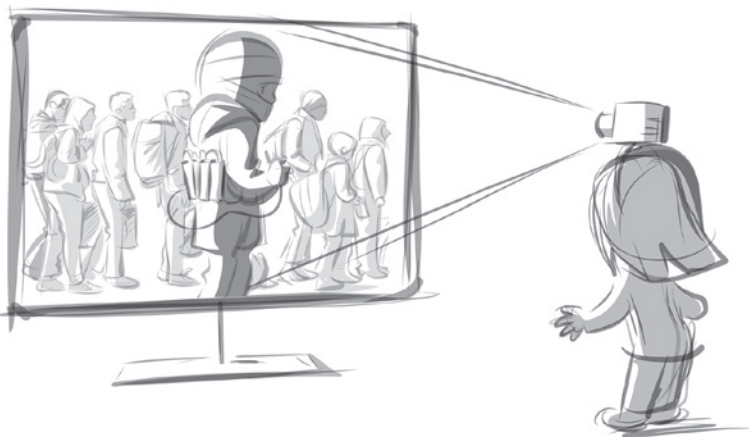
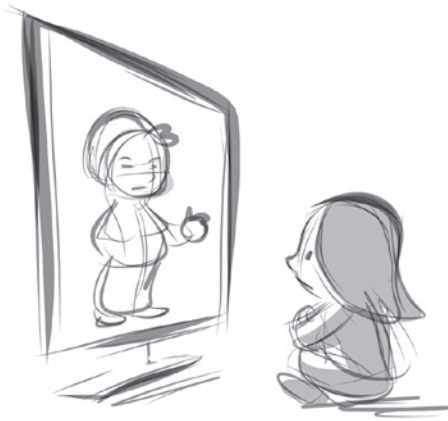


Illustration: Hansi Helle / © IZI

III. 4: Media can be integrated into the children's internal images and shape their presuppositions and assessments of others

Internal images as a lense

With the moments that are significant for children, television enters their internal images, their internal representations of their world. This holds true especially for things they haven't yet seen or experienced in reality, such as what foreign countries look like or what people are like. The inner images in turn influence their presuppositions and creative perspectives on, but also projections onto, reality.

If, for example, children hear it said in their social environment that there are a lot of terrorists among refugees and media provide the pictures, words, and additional reinforcement of these interpretations, children project this idea onto real refugees and interpret them as a danger (Götz et al., 2016 forthcoming) (III. 4).

Scripts as behavioural patterns

It is well established that children take on scripts from media, i. e. short sequences of action, e. g. how to give a cool response, how to be elated, how to present oneself, etc. (Anderson & Lorch, 1983). When a child or adolescent sees a figure as an ideal embodiment of his or her own goals and values, he or she imitates typical phrases or movements, for instance. If a certain image seems to be something to aspire to, the corresponding outfit, moves and gestures are emulated. Some children thus adopt aggressive behaviour from television programmes. If acting violently fits with their other values and experiences, and if the programme offers them sufficient opportunity to

identify it with their own position, and the media narrative shows that aggression is justified and successful, it can result in aggressive behavioural patterns. Boys are particularly at risk here (see for example Strasburger et al., 2009).

10-year-old Bülent lives with his parents, who migrated to Germany from Turkey, his two sisters and two older brothers, in a tough residential area of Berlin. For months he has watched the anime series *Dragon Ball Z* with his two sisters. When asked what has changed in his life since he has started watching *Dragon Ball Z*, he says: "I somehow feel stronger. If someone hits me, for example, at school, then I really scream and hit hard, like in *Dragon Ball Z*. In the past I did not defend myself." (Götz, 2014)

TELEVISION PROGRAMMES AS PART OF IDENTITY FORMATION – OPPORTUNITIES AND DANGERS

Children and adolescents use media texts in order to gain a better understanding of themselves, discover new concepts, integrate experiences, and to discuss their own ideas about the world with others. Quality programmes are programmes in which children and adolescents recognise themselves and their worlds of experience. If programmes help them to restore their mental equilibrium, to observe and integrate their internal facets, this must be viewed positively.

By the same token, these processes of appropriation are also fraught with problems, since children's worlds of experience always come packaged. Each character children use has a certain appearance, lives in a certain social and cultural context, and experiences stories that are bound up with certain values.

When children enter into an intensive relationship with a television character, when they imagine parasocial relationships, process their own experiences via fragments of media stories, or use media to communicate and compare

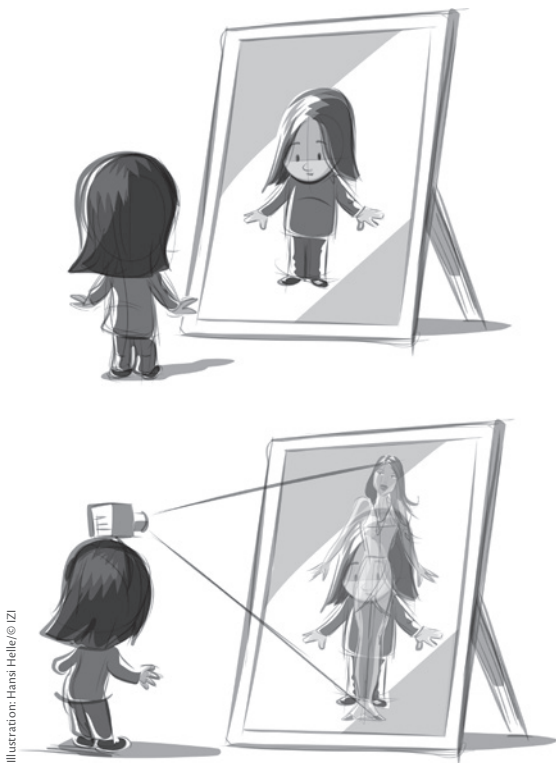


Illustration: Hani Helly © IZI

Ill. 5: Media can enter the children's internal images and thus become part of the perception of oneself

values with friends and parents, they also take on patterns of action and interpretation. The way identity themes and model relationships are packaged merge – albeit through selection and interpretation – with the internal images of children and adolescents. Thus, they become the lens through which boys and girls see themselves and others, impacting on presupposition through projection (Ill. 5).

It is here that the real quality of a media text proves itself. Does it contribute to an appropriate understanding of one's own internal worlds? Does it support a constructive examination of oneself and one's social environment? Does it help children to develop interpretative and behavioural patterns that allow sustained pro-social cooperation? Quality television programmes thus always seek to open up new perspectives and challenge stereotypes. This can be achieved by classic children's television shows, as we saw in the case of *Pippi Longstocking* (see Haager in

this issue) or new series such as *Annedroids*. But it is also possible to increase dissatisfaction with one's own body and to foster existing tendencies towards psycho-social illness, as we have observed in the case of the format *Germany's Next Topmodel* and eating disorders. These are forms of identity negotiation that are damaging for the individual and thus for society as a whole, too. Even if children and adolescents usually select only minute aspects of the media for their identity formation, it is always worth exercising caution with regard to detail. ■

NOTE

¹ Many thanks to Andrea Holler for this lovely interview.

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