HIDDEN CHARACTER TRAITS IN 2022'S CHILDREN'S TV SHOWS

Word Count: 4405

INTRODUCTION:

According to the Glencoe Sociology and You Textbook, "mass media display role models for children to imitate. Mass media offers children ideas about the values in their society by providing images of achievement and success, activity and work, equality and democracy" (Jon M. Shepard 2000). AAP Publications on Health Effects of Media on Children explain that the youth spend an average of seven plus hours/day using media, and the vast majority of them have access to a bedroom television, computer, the Internet, a video-game console, and possibly a cell phone. Studies have shown that the media can provide information about safe health practices and can foster social connectedness. However, recent evidence raises concerns about the media effects on aggression, sexual behavior, substance use, disordered eating, and academic difficulties" (Strasburger, Jordan, Donnerstein 2010). Media exposure at a young age has shown to cause future behavioral issues for children, which establishes the initial problem in this field of study. As society continues to become more advanced, so does technology for younger generations.

The age at which parents begin to give their child a cell phone continues to get younger and younger, in today's age, as it is one of our only ways of communicating with each other. According to Kamenetz from NPR, "in 2015, most kids had a phone by age 14. And now just over half the children surveyed have their first phone by age 11, and about 1 in 5 have one by the age of 8 years old" (Anya Kamenetz 2019). This goes hand and hand with the age infants are exposed to cartoons for entertainment. The exposure at such a young age heightens concern for many of the different conditions it can create later. This is the basis of my research question; society's advancements. Technology continues to grow more and more in society from the workplace to educational settings, to home improvements. The incentive to allow children to

watch TV continues to grow as it seems convenient being something they enjoy doing. According to the Milne Library, "the portrayal of a character in a movie can also be phrased by the formula: Dialogue + Physical Movement = Character." Viewers want to watch characters of a show develop like one would in real life. This is what connects us to the characters, because we feel a large relationship to them as society continues to keep up with them throughout episodes. Being able to watch these characters at any time of the day heightens one's incentive to watch more and more hours throughout the day. The more one watches a show, the more influenced an individual is by the actions they see on a screen.

The problem does not stop here. According to Urban Child Institute children do not have to watch television to be affected by it. "In many households with children, the television is on most or all of the time, whether or not someone is watching. Half of children's TV exposure consists of background television—television that a child can see or hear even though he is not actively watching" (The Urban Child Institute 2016). The same article states that, "everyday activities like singing, playing, and socializing, help babies and toddlers sharpen their cognitive abilities and motor skills, but the frequent distractions caused by background television and sound can hinder this process. Young children are less able to focus their attention on active, hands-on play while the television is on. Background TV can threaten cognitive and language development and may be linked to attention problems later in childhood" (Urban Child Institute 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW:

A study from the National Library of Medicine, by Paediatric Children Health, explains how television has the potential to generate both positive and negative effects. The findings suggest that the amount of infant TV viewing before 2 years of age is more strongly associated

with hyperactivity–inattention problems at 30 months than that after 2 years of age. As many

studies have looked at the impact of television on society, particularly on children and

adolescents. An individual child's developmental level is a critical factor in determining whether

the medium will have positive or negative effects. Not all television programs are bad, but data

showing the negative effects of exposure to violence, inappropriate sexuality and offensive

language are convincing. According to Paediatric Children Health current literature suggests the

following:

- "Physicians can change and improve children's television viewing habits."
- "Children watch excessive amounts of television."
- "There is a relationship between watching violent television programming and an increase in violent behavior by children."
- "Excessive television watching contributes to the increased incidence of childhood obesity."
- "Excessive television watching may have a deleterious effect on learning and academic performance."
- "Watching certain programs may encourage irresponsible sexual behavior."
- "Television is an effective way of advertising products to children of various ages."

Researchers Shunyue Cheng, Tadahiko Maeda, Sakakihara Yoichi, Zentaro Yamagata,

and Kiyotaka Tomiwa analyzed data from the Japan Children's Study to see if television (TV)

viewing may be associated with increased behavioral and emotional problems in children. The

outcomes were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). According to

the researchers, "the percentage of children who watched TV 4 hours or more per day was 29.4%

at age 18 months, 24.5% at age 30 months, and 21% at both ages. Hyperactivity–inattention at

age 30 months was positively associated with TV exposure at age 18 months, whereas prosocial

behavior was negatively associated with hours of exposure even after adjustment" (Chiu, Y. C.,

Li, Y. F., Wu, W. C., & Chiang, T. L. 2017). The article states that "the effect of TV viewing on

children's developmental outcomes is likely to vary by age or neurodevelopmental stage of the

child at the time of exposure, as well as by media content," (Chiu, Y. C., Li, Y. F., Wu, W. C., & Chiang, T. L. 2017). As a newborn's brain continues to develop through the first years of life, several studies have suggested that large amounts of TV exposure may have harmful effects on behavior and social skills in early infancy. Analyses from the same Japan Children's study, have shown that TV viewing before age 3 years is associated with a detrimental effect on reading recognition and reading comprehension scores, with each additional hour/day.

Now this is not meant to go so far as to say that television is all bad for children as many shows allow for educational learning like the alphabet. "Watching *Sesame Street* is an example of how toddlers can learn valuable lessons about racial harmony, cooperation, kindness, simple arithmetic and the alphabet through an educational television format. Some public television programs stimulate visits to the zoo, libraries, bookstores, museums and other active recreational settings, and educational videos can certainly serve as powerful prosocial teaching devices" (Paediatric Children Health 2003). As the PCH was able to determine that children do pick up things portrayed in the media, educational or not, is the driving factor of this research.

There are multiple studies of the harmful effects media can have on the developmental processes of children, but this is where my research comes in, looking at the harmful effects to personality traits and values, in the most popular and influential TV shows for children five to eight years old. Research clearly shows that TV has an effect on children, but this research is going to fill in the gap of how. Specific characters that adolescents idealize, may be portraying many characteristics that can be very influential to the development of morals, values, attitudes, and behavioral trends. With that being said my final research question is what are the character traits in different genres of cartoons targeting 5-8 year olds? The targeted age group has been shown from a large field of children's psychological research from the Southern Early Childhood

Association which discusses the period of a child's life that they develop their sense of self, values and beliefs, and their attitudes and behaviors, making the most influential age from 5-10 years old. This time period is where children begin to understand morals and values, and begin to form their own personalities, but also where children are most impacted by the influence of what they surround themselves by, so the main guiding research goal is based specifically on showing if children pick up personality traits portrayed by the characters they idealize within the most popular TV shows for 5-8 year olds. The null hypothesis states that, there is no relationship between main character traits and children's behavioral issues. The hypothesis that will be tested, also known as the alternative hypothesis, states that characters portray more negative and insincere traits that allow children to think it is justifiable. This research shall address the issue of media being used as a convenient way of entertainment for children, through the coding process of character traits seen within these popular youth television shows.

METHODOLOGY:

Alejandro Cosentino from the National Library of Medicine conducted a study aiming to establish individual differences in positive characteristics that mainly focus on moral traits. He created a replicable model of factors comprising positive psychological human characteristics shared by a social group, based on point of view. From here he was able to generate a list of positive human characteristics from multiple dictionaries, from there was referred to and reviewed by experts. Cosentino then created a model that is now referred to as the Five Factor Personality Model, from a series of responses of 1000 volunteers that responded to items described to them and how much they relate to their personalities. The author used these scoring responses to make the Five Factor Personality Model consisting of five identification traits: openness, agreeableness, extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness.

The Five-Factor Model of Personality		
Factor	Low Score Description	High Score Description
Neuroticism	Calm, Even-tempered, Self-satisfied, Comfortable, Unemotional, Hardy	Worrying, Temperamental, Self-pitying, Self-conscious, Emotional, Vulnerable
Extraversion	Reserved, Loner, Quiet, Passive, Sober, Unfeeling	Affectionate, Joiner, Talkative, Active, Fun-loving, Passionate
Openness to Experience	Down-to-earth, Uncreative, Conventional, Prefer routine, Uncurious, Conservative	Imaginative, Creative, Original, Prefer variety, Curious, Liberal
Agreeableness	Ruthless, Suspicious, Stingy, Antagonistic, Critical, Irritable	Softhearted, Trusting, Generous, Acquiescent, Lenient, Good-natured
Conscientiousness	Negligent, Lazy, Disorganized, Late, Aimless, Quitting	Conscientious, Hardworking, Well-organized, Punctual, Ambitious, Persevering
Taken from McCrae and Costa (2003)		

Image Source: McCrae and Costa (2003), Retrieved from PressBooks at https://open.baypath.edu/psy321book/chapter/c19p2/

The chart above fully lays out the basis of the Five Factor Model of Personality, giving descriptions of a low and high score based on the character. Each trait has a description next to it of what to look for in terms of scoring. For example if a character shows signs of being talkative and affectionate, they score high in terms of extraversion. But if they are critical and ruthless, they could potentially have a low score in the agreeableness category. All will be used on a scale of 1 to 7, just as the author designed it to be. One being the character hits all the criteria for being a low score, and seven being the character hits all the criteria in the high scoring column portraying positive energy and traits to the viewer.

 At first glance this method looked perfect for the data needing to be collected, but with further consideration I had deemed this to be too broad for my field of research. Instead it was decided upon to look at my personality traits from an elementary perspective. Using the foundation of Cosentino's findings, I created my own Personality Model using personality traits taught to elementary school students, from Elementary Essentials. A PDF from Elementary Essentials laid out pages of the specific positive, neutral, and negative traits that are communicated to children when learning about personality traits. Utilizing this source I was able to make a table of my own depicting positive, negative, and neutral traits to look for while coding selected shows. Since there were multiple pages of adjectives for traits and feelings, I

combined most terms with a forward slash (/). This is to exclude bias from the selection of terms, so that most terms are used. The terms that were excluded were terms that needed further explanation on what specifically that would look like for a character. For example: admirable could be seen as praiseworthy, but what defines a character as praiseworthy without including personal opinion into the coding process. So using the table created allows for a visual representation of the traits looked for that are considered "positive, negative, and neutral" without the concern of bias. Below are the traits that I have chosen and combined based on the Elementary Essentials Character Traits and Feelings.

Positive (+)	Neutral (/)	Negative (-)
Adventurous/Active	Talkative/Silly	Aggressive/Violent
Brave	Timid/Shy/Quiet	Bossy/Critical
Compassionate/Considerate	Unpredictable/Spontaneous	Dishonest/Disloyal
Dedicated/Dependable	Secretive	Greedy
Forgiving	Rambunctious	Hateful/Mean
Honorable/Honest	Competitive	Impolite/Rude
Intelligent	Protective/Proud	Lazy/Moody
Passionate	Sassy	Stubborn/Picky
Perseverant	Bold	Uncooperative
Responsible	Clumsy	Unfriendly
Sociable/Outgoing	Fidgety	Impulsive
Understanding	Determined	Insincere
Thoughtful	Mysterious	Careless
Loyal	Sarcastic	Paranoid
Humble	Tough	Pessimistic

(Above is the self-made table based on the traits being used during the coding process, taken from the Elementary Essentials PDF, Retrieved from:
https://www.northernpolarbears.com/cms/lib/PA09000074/Centricity/Domain/909/CharacterTraitsvsCharacterEmotionsAdjective Lists.pdf)

Victor Battistich from the University of Missouri, St. Louis, defines what a true character is to a watcher. According to him a "character refers to a much broader constellation of attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and skills." Battistich's statement justifies my methodology and question, as it is shown through research that main characters can have more influence on children than one would first think to believe. wayed my decision-making for choosing TV shows to code, within my age group. Based on Battistich's statement, I wanted to choose shows with an obvious main character/leader. A character that clearly dominates the majority of the show, so that when coding there is mainly only one character being looked up to by its viewers. "*Best Kids TV Shows*", by Hannah Doolin, Danielle Valente, and Matthew Signer, establishes the most popular TV shows based on the age group each show targets. From this article I was able to select the different shows that I will be coding, that was divided up by genre. There were two shows for each genre selected, where I attempted to pick one based on a male dominated character and a female dominated character to compare the different traits portrayed. These shows can be seen below:

Action	Fantasy	Educational	Musical	Adventure
Kim Possible	My Little Pony	Doc McStuffins	Sofia the First	Dora
Paw Patrol	SpongeBob SquarePants	Octonauts	Mickey Mouse Clubhouse	Phineas and Ferb

(Above are the shows in order from genre, that will be coded. The top show depicts shows with a female dominated character, and the bottom with a male dominated character. This image was fully self made from Google Documents.)

All shows will be watched through previously purchased streaming platforms (Hulu, Apple TV, Netflix, and Disney +) on my personal computer, which entails no safety concerns, since there will be no usage of toxic chemicals or hazardous materials. My proposed method complies with ethical research practices since it is all used by previous, credible researchers, and it maintains scientific integrity as there will be no tampering with results/outcomes. These research

parameters do not go outside of watching shows, and coding for behavioral patterns in personality. There will be no statistical test run to quantify data, as I will be utilizing only a literary analysis for my results.

RESULTS:

All my results were divided into genre, as each genre has its own self-generated segmented bar chart. Each chart was divided into female dominated character shows and male dominated shows. This can be described as whether or not the main character being examined was a female or male. Some key details to note is that green represents positive, yellow for neutral, and red for negative. This will be the color coding of each chart seen below. Also when referring to specific traits seen in my chart, to specify positive, negative, and neutral, I will be adding each symbol seen at the top of each column. Positive will be denoted with a plus sign (+), negative with a minus sign (-), and neutral with a forward slash (/). For example outgoing which can be seen in the positive column and will be referred to as; Outgoing (+).

This brings me to my findings for the Action Genre:

Figure 1

Character Traits Portrayed in Children's Action TV Shows

Paw Patrol vs Kim Possible
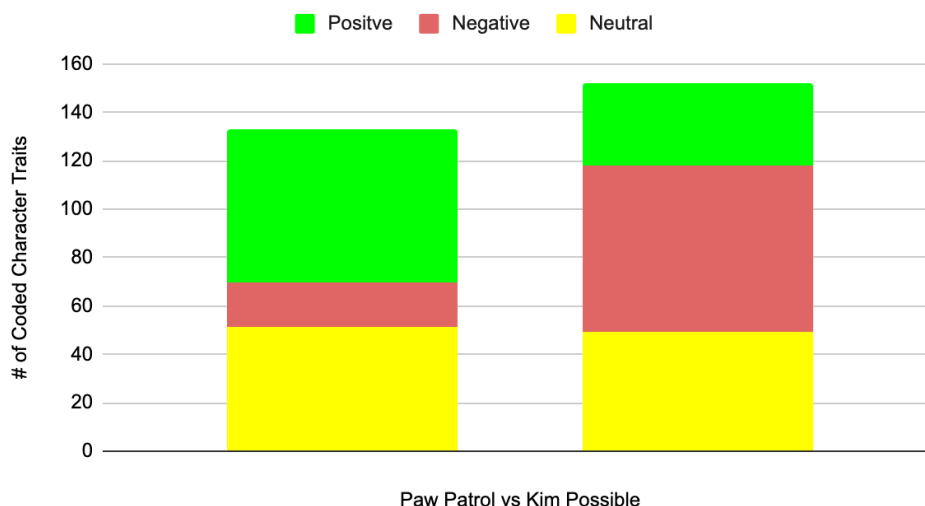
This chart is displaying the amount of positive, negative and neutral traits seen in Paw Patrol and Kim Possible. This genre had the biggest difference in traits out of all five genres. Paw Patrol portrayed a total of 63 positive traits, 19 negative traits, and 51 neutral traits. Kim Possible presented a total of 34 positive traits, 69 negative traits, and 49 neutral traits. Which shows a 50 negative trait difference seen between the female dominated shows and male dominated shows in the action genre. The three most popular character traits seen in Paw Patrol were Intelligent (+), Clumsy (/), and Silly (/) which occurred at least once through all ten randomly generated episodes. All of these traits can be seen in either the positive or neutral category of my personalized personality chart. As for Kim Possible there was a high amount of Bossy (-), Insincere (-), and Brave (+). Two of which can be found in the negative column of my personality chart. This brings me to my next genre of Fantasy:

Figure 2

Character Traits Portrayed in Children's Fantasy TV Shows
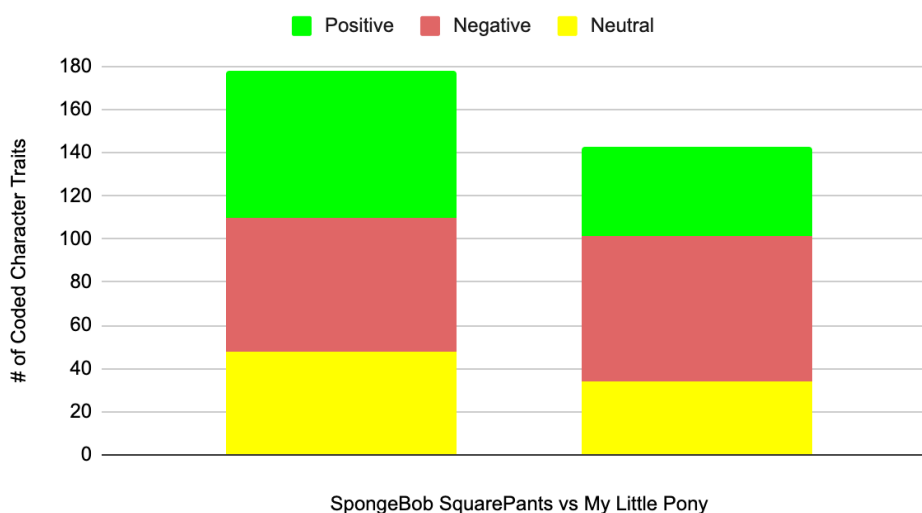
The fantasy genre includes SpongeBob SquarePants and My Little Pony. SpongeBob

showed a total of 68 positive traits, 62 negative traits, and 48 neutral traits. As for My Little

Pony exemplified a total of 42 positive traits, 67 negative traits, and 34 neutral traits. There are

five negative trait differences between the female dominated show and male. SpongeBob's most

occurred character traits were Talkative (/), Pessimistic (-), and Spontaneous (/), as for My Little

Pony saw Sassy (/), Stubborn (-), and Forgiving (+) as the three most popular traits. All of these

traits occurred more than once throughout each randomly generated episode. Moving on to the

Educational Genre:

Figure 3

Character Traits Portrayed in Children's Educational TV Shows
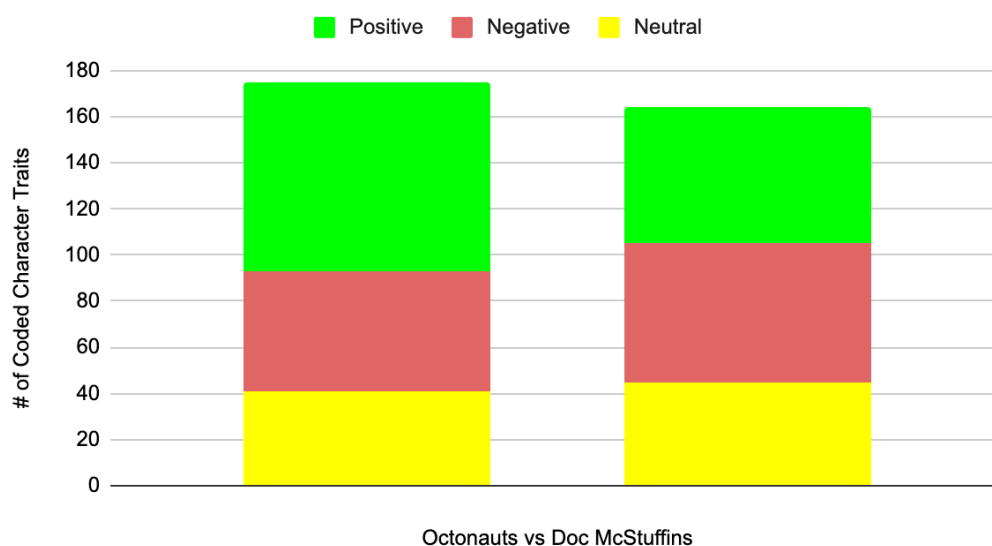
The educational genre includes Octonauts and Doc McStuffins. Octonauts represented a

total of 82 positive traits, 52 negative traits, and 41 neutral traits. On the other hand Doc

McStuffins presented a total of 59 positive traits, 60 negative traits, and 45 neutral traits. The

female dominated show has a higher amount of negative traits by eight traits. The larger amount

of negative traits seen in each show, displays a negative dominance over positivity. The most

prominent traits seen in Octonauts were Honorable (+), Determined (/), and Compassionate (+).

As for the most seen traits in Doc McStuffins were Responsible (+), Picky (-), and Passionate

(+). Both shows had a majority of positive traits that occurred but Octonauts had more neutral

traits to where Doc McStuffins carried more negative traits rather than neutral. Onto the Musical
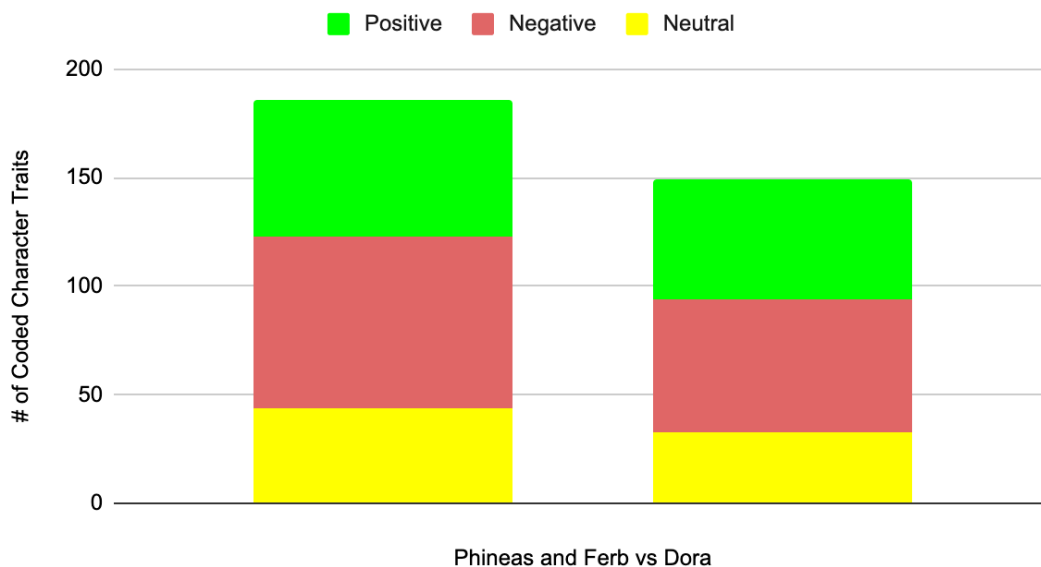
Genre:

Figure 4
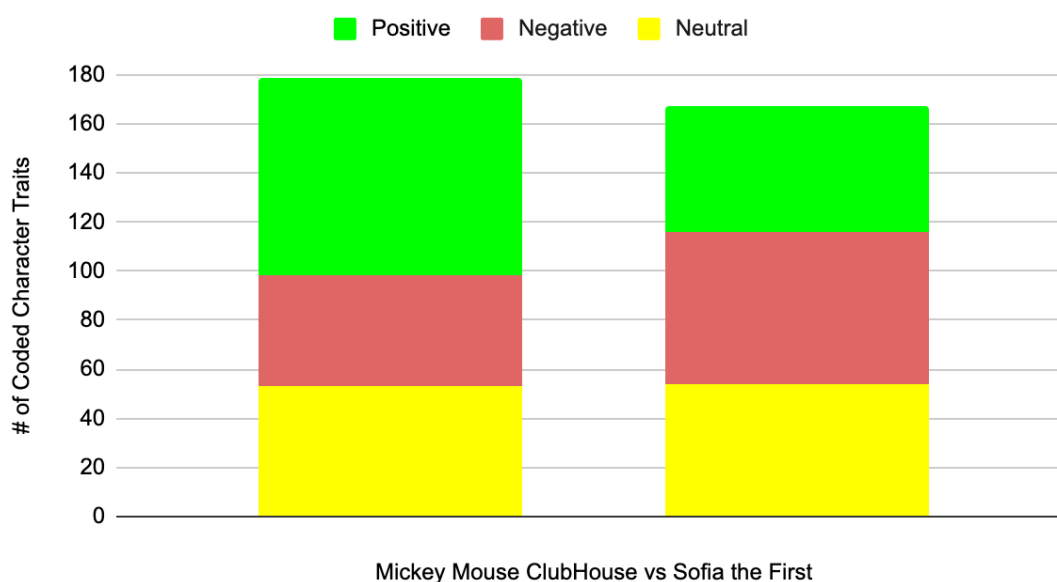
The musical genre includes Mickey Mouse ClubHouse and Sofia the First. Mickey

Mouse displayed 81 positive traits, 45 negative traits, and 53 neutral traits. As Sofia the First

presented 51 positive traits, 62 negative traits, and 54 neutral traits. Sofia the First took the lead

with the negative traits containing 17 more than Mickey Mouse. The most popular traits in Sofia

the First were Loyal (+), Impolite (-), and Determined (/). Mickey Mouse portrayed Dependable

(+), Honest (+), and Rambunctious (/) traits throughout the ten randomly selected episodes. Sofia

the First contained the closest numbers between each category of traits, but portrayed more

obstructive traits for watchers. Which brings me to my last genre being Adventure Shows:

Figure 5

Character Traits Portrayed in Children's Adventure Shows

The last genre that was coded was the Adventure Genre containing Phineas and Ferb and Dora. Phineas and Ferb displayed a total of 63 positive traits, 79 negative traits, and 44 neutral traits. Dora presented 55 positive traits, 61 negative traits, and 33 neutral traits. This genre contained the only shows where the female dominated show did not portray the most negativity. Phineas and Ferb 79 negative traits creating an 18 point difference between the two shows. Dora's most prominent traits contained Intelligent (+), Outgoing (+), and Protective (/). Phineas and Ferb, on the other hand, depicted Careless (-), Aggressive (-), and Sassy (/) as the top three traits seen throughout the show. This is the only show that saw no positive traits in the top three recurring themes.

DISCUSSION:

From my results it is clear that the more female dominated shows depicted a larger

amount of negativity over the male characters. This means children who are watching these specific shows for entertainment or enjoyment purposes, are taught to think these actions are acceptable. Referencing back to the Glencoe Sociology and You, "mass media display role models for children to imitate, as it offers children ideas about the values in their society" (Jon M. Shepard 2000). Children are raised watching television shows that are approved by parents, as they think this is what all children want, but is it really what they need? My research shows that 41% of female dominated shows are fully negative character traits, with only a 31% rate of positivity. Male dominated shows display a total of 30%, with a higher 42% rate of positivity. As for both male and female shows had 28% of the overall total, being neutral traits. All of these percentages shown were found by adding the total amount of positive traits seen, and dividing by the total number of traits seen throughout the female/male dominated shows. Same goes for negative and neutral traits. There was an overall total of 851 traits seen throughout the five male dominated shows, with 357 being positive, 257 negative, and 237 neutral. The female dominated shows calculated a total of 775 overall traits, with 241 being positive, 319 negative, and 215 neutral. Seeing the difference in mainly the amount of positive and negative traits from female to male shows the contrast between the two different gender portrayals to children. The females were seen to be bossy, critical, picky, and stubborn. As the males were to be recognized as brave, determined, honorable, and clumsy. These traits may have an impact on the way children develop their personalities, morals, and values. A child watching only My Little Pony, may develop a different sense of society, rather than children watching Paw Patrol.

According to "Post-screen-time anger & frustration in kids," by Aditi Garg, "multiple studies have shown that excessive screen time has been linked to school problems, anger, aggression, frustration, depression and other emotional problems" (Garg 2021). The environment

children are placed in at a young age can fully affect their development and knowledge of

accepted behavior, and the media clearly plays a role in that. These results partially proved my

hypothesis, to which there are more negative traits that appear in children's TV shows, but the

variation between traits seen in male dominated shows compared to female, was not accounted

for in my hypothesis.

Overall the most recommended show for children would be Paw Patrol as it was one of

the highest scoring shows in the positive trait category, with the largest difference between

positive and negative traits. As a show may have the most positive traits, the true teller of the

intention for a show is the large or small amount of negative traits portrayed. For example

SpongeBob has a high amount of 68 positive traits but only a six point difference with 62

negative traits. That is not exactly a show that would be highly recommended for children at a

developing stage, as there are still a fair amount of negative traits that may be picked up and

taken into account. This is exactly what my research is able to show, the specific traits and at

what time they occurred during each show.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS:

Although my research is replicable there are limitations that need to be accounted for.

The first being bias, at which I am the only one watching and coding, personal bias may be a

factor in my conclusions. For example one may see bossy and critical to be a form of dominant

and strong. There is no true way to eliminate the possible bias in a content analysis as every

individual sees character traits very differently. My personality model held me to strict guidelines

followed throughout my coding process to ensure I was limiting bias as much as possible. Which

brings me to my second limitation being a restriction of coding adjectives. Elementary Essentials

had over a 100 traits, to which I only selected 15-20 for each category. The limit of adjectives

may limit the total representation of each character. Throughout my coding process there were many character traits I saw that were not accounted for in my personality model, and therefore they were not included in the overall conclusion. If this research were to be replicated again, I would suggest a larger amount of character traits to be coded for. Lastly a personal limitation was the district wifi block of all streaming platforms required to code. This was a major setback in my research, as I was barely ever able to conduct research during class time. All research had to be done outside of the school, as the wifi constricted the sites needed to access for coding purposes. Although there were many setbacks and current limitations, my findings may be the stepping stone to categorize aggressive or abnormal behavior to the specific shows children have been watching. With a broader knowledge basis this research could be done again but with high grade equipment to produce larger findings, expanding individual knowledge on the overall effect that media exposure has on children. Now that society is aware that heightened exposure of television at a young age has a large impact on what children begin to know as acceptable, there could be restrictions put in place to ensure children are allowed a fair chance to develop their own sense of morals, values, and beliefs, without the media. If this research is replicated to a further extent, researchers may very well be able to understand the cognitive development of an individual based on their most watched television show as a child. All of which would benefit society, and younger generations in the long run.

CONCLUSION:

Overall, my sample of ten children's TV shows from the early 2000's contained a lot of negativity. Although each show still had high amounts of positivity, all it takes is for a child to pick up one bad trait, and base behavior off of it. While my original hypothesis stated that most shows contain main characters that portray more negative and insincere traits that allow children

to think it is acceptable, which remained true. What was not accounted for in my hypothesis is the difference between the positive and negative traits from male to female main characters. This is where the truth lies between each show, as the females are made out to seem more bossy and sassy rather than males. The results showed that female dominated shows contained 11% more negative traits, on average, than males. As for male dominated shows contained 11% more positivity than females. This large gap was not taken into consideration when generating my hypothesis. Although these results can tell us a lot about the intention that lies within each show itself. A lot of shows have a protagonist and antagonist, also known as the hero and the villain. The main characters that were being coded from each show were mainly set to defeat these characters, and return their society to normal. The male characters were seen to be brave (+), adventurous (+), and protective (/). While the females were to be portrayed as stubborn(-), sassy (/), and rude (-). The difference in gender roles that was seen as a statistically significant result, needs to be taken into consideration for future research. In sum, female characters were taught to be more negative, while males were prominently positive. There needs to be a curriculum added into Elementary schools, to teach children at the developmental level that females and males are equal. Children are going to pick up anything they see from individuals they have set as their role models. Whether that be a parent, teacher, or favorite TV show character, it all plays a role in the development of their morals, values, behavior, and beliefs.

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