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# Children's Interpretations of Animated Characters and Gender in an Austrian Context

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Master's thesis in Childhood Studies
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May 2024

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# Abstract

This research explores how children interpret animated characters in media in an Austrian context, with a specific emphasis on their interpretations related to gender. Discourses on children, gender, and the media are often shaped by a protective approach, emphasizing concerns regarding children's exposure to potentially harmful content or influences. In examining the topic in this research project, however, theoretical views from the research field of childhood studies are prominent. Key concepts such as childhood being socially constructed and the role of children's voices and agency in shaping their interpretations are acknowledged. The theoretical view within the research field of childhood studies provided a starting point for connecting it with other theoretical frameworks. The study delves into the intersection of gender and childhood through the lens of feminist poststructuralism, specifically emphasizing Butler's theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is constructed and influenced by language, power dynamics, and the broader social and cultural context. Language assumes a pivotal role in shaping interpretations within the media landscape. Hence, media studies, in relation to cultural studies and audience studies, are regarded as central in this research. These theoretical perspectives also encompass approaches that acknowledge the interplay among context, language, and children's agency in interpreting media content. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study seeks to explore such social phenomena. To incorporate children's voices, a semi- structured visual stimulus interview was combined with the participatory tools of ranking and drawing activities. The fieldwork was conducted in Austria and included 11 children between the ages of 10 and 13 years.

The results of the study, generated through qualitative thematic analysis of children's discussions and interpretations, reveal a complex interplay of societal norms, personal experiences, and media representations, influencing children's sense making of animated characters in relation to gender. While the children participating in this research project demonstrate a more fluid understanding of gender, binary gender norms often underpin their interpretations, influencing their perceptions of characteristics and behaviors of animated characters. The study highlights the importance of recognizing the constructed nature of gender norms and gender. Overall, this research contributes to the fields of childhood studies, media studies, and gender studies by providing insights into the dynamic nature of children's understanding of gender in animated media.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Linn Cathrin Lorgen. Thank you for your guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the process of writing this thesis. Without your input, feedback, and our discussions, this thesis would not have evolved like it did. I also extend my gratitude to the other professors at NTNU, especially within childhood studies, whose invaluable knowledge enriched my understanding and contributed to the development of this thesis.

I could not have undertaken this journey without the children who participated in this research project. Thank you for generously sharing your insightful perspectives with me. I'm also grateful to the gatekeepers for their cooperation and support throughout this endeavor.

Many thanks to my friends, especially the friends I made while studying in Trondheim, for your unwavering support throughout the process of writing this thesis. I truly appreciate every conversation we had and every piece of emotional support I received.

Finally, I'd like to thank my parents and my brother who encouraged me to study abroad and to always do my best. Thank you for always being there for me.

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# 1 Introduction

In contemporary times, it is difficult to envision societies without media. It stands as a crucial element within diverse cultures and societies. From an early age, children engage with various forms of media, which encompass analog sources like books as well as digital media like television and the internet. The interwovenness and dynamics of media and childhood has, especially in recent decades, provided a scope of discussions, questions and challenges (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2021). These discourses on children and the media have been shaped by a protective approach arguing that children require safeguarding from the media. The majority of these debates are viewed from a media perspective and focus for example on cyberbullying, sexting and media effects and their influences on children (Buckingham, 2009; Friesem, 2016). Regarding media content and its messages, considerations of gender and its representation conveyed through diverse media formats are often present in such discourses (Buckingham, 2009). Thus, discussions on children, media and gender are gaining interest and attention across various research domains, including the field of childhood studies (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

In my prior studies in Primary Education and Communication and Mass Media, I frequently encountered debates concerning childhood and digital media, with animated media content being a recurring topic in educational, scientific, and media psychological contexts. The learning effects of animated videos in an educational setting or the effects of the portrayal of animated characters on its viewers are only two of many examples of discussion on children and animated media I have encountered. Therefore, the connection between children and animation has gained my personal interest (Findeisen et al., 2019; Maahs et al., 2023; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2021). In relation to gender and animation, it is often argued that animation and the characters in it convey cultural messages like body images or gender norms that negatively affect children as viewers of such content. Thus, it is reasoned within such debates that children need protection from such content (Cavalier, 2011; Silvio, 2010).

While I got familiar with the research field of childhood studies, I have also become more interested in looking at these debates from children's perspectives. Within childhood studies the focus lies on recognizing children as social agents, whose active engagement with their society and environment contribute to shaping the understanding of childhood and children's everyday lives (Abebe, 2019; James & Prout, 2015). Thus, childhood is perceived to be socially constructed and context dependent. The shaping of children's understandings and surroundings is intricately linked with various factors such as class, gender or ethnicity (James & James, 2012; James & Prout, 2015). In alignment with perspectives on children and media within childhood studies, gender has captured my deeper attention. Children, media and gender has been researched in various research fields (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). The majority of research on children and animated characters, however, has been designed as effect studies, focusing on the influence and effects animation has on children. This applies especially in connection to gender, where many previous studies have explored the effects of gender portrayals in animated characters on children (Gökçearslan, 2010; Coyne et al., 2016; Xu, 2021). Only a small amount of research on animated characters has explored the topic in regard to the children's interpretation of the characters as well as gender (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023;

Tobin, 2000; Duvall, 2010). To enhance insight into children, animation, and gender, this project will focus on researching children's interpretation of animated content, specifically animated characters depicted in various forms of media such as movies or games, with a focus on gender. The field of childhood studies provides various key concepts as well as theoretical frameworks that inspired the research and its design. The interdisciplinary approach of childhood studies also opened up for combining multiple other disciplines like gender and media studies within this project. These theoretical approaches also recognize the role of children and their social contexts in shaping their interpretations of gender.

## 1.1 Context of the research

The intersection of children, media, and gender is widely debated in Austria, with some discussions focusing solely on children and media, others on children and gender, and some encompassing all three aspects (Saferinternet.at, 2024). Austria, a small landlocked country in south-central Europe, has a protracted history that has shaped its egalitarian society and culture. The country's historical context has influenced values, policies, and social structures, which persist in shaping the nation's identity and practices today. This also includes the social construct of childhood and thus also the society's understanding of what it means to be a child (Leichter et al., 2024; Scroope, 2018). Due to the evolving media landscape, media has become integral to the daily lives of children, regardless of whether they are in educational, public, or private environments (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Digitalization leads to the emergence of new forms of media, which are often perceived as risks and therefore also discussed in Austrian society. Such debates on media (especially digital media) and children are also very present for both children as well as adults (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022). It is discussed that parents need to understand how to safeguard children, shielding them from potential risks like inappropriate content, cyberbullying, grooming and fake news (Saferinternet.at, 2024). Meanwhile, children should develop competencies such as media literacy to safely engage with and navigate media (Friesem, 2016). Thus, policies and regulations have been laid down for protecting children during their interactions with the media. These policies therefore suggest that media is something children need to be protected from, rarely acknowledging their opportunities and advantages as well as the children's opinion (Saferinternet.at, 2023). This trend is not limited to Austria but is a prevalent phenomenon internationally, shaping perspectives on children and media across many societies (Buckingham, 2009; Drotner, 2009). Even though media is often perceived as being a rather hazardous site for children to engage with, they are often also chosen as specific target groups for some forms of media. Especially the format of animation is often considered to be child friendly. In recent years, the term "animation" is often understood as a process and method in digital media to visualize movements and actions (Wells, 1998). Animated characters play an important role in today's pop culture, some subcultures as well as in children's lives (Cavalier, 2011; Silvio, 2010). In the protective stance toward children and media, there is a focus on how animation and its characters communicate cultural messages such as body images or gender norms, which are perceived as potentially harmful to children (Parlakyildiz et al., 2022; Türkmen, 2021; Duvall, 2010). Therefore, the aspect of gender in relation to media and children has come to the forefront within an Austrian context.

Gender is also gaining importance in general societal discussions, such as in relation to gender-neutral language or gender budgeting, which also includes addressing the gender pay gap (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, 2023). Austria's society and politics also embrace

the concept of gender mainstreaming. According to the Federal Chancellery of Austria (2023), the country has aimed to legally and politically achieve gender equality at all levels. However, the Federal Chancellery (2023) mainly emphasizes women and men in gender mainstreaming, viewing equal treatment of both sexes and the right to equal participation in all spheres of life as fundamental human rights and key conditions for democracy. In many respects, Austria's gender debates are shaped by a binary of male and female. This is also evident in discussions about the media, where gender has gained particular significance in television in terms of representation and distribution of gender (Moldaschl et al., 2024). Many analyses focus on the portrayal of gender, especially in film production. Influenced by international research and discussions, animated films are now also being discussed in Austria, with particular emphasis on the portrayal of women and gender roles (Moldaschl et al., 2024). More and more discussions now revolve not only around women in animated media but also around men and individuals who do not fit into the binary. Given that children in Austria are considered vulnerable and affected by media content, the issue of gender and media in relation to children in Austrian society is now being addressed. Simultaneously, there is recognition of children's agency and a desire to empower them to actively engage with media and gender issues (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, 2023; Saferinternet.at, 2024; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

## 1.2 A gap in research

When I first started exploring the intersection of children and media, I quickly discovered the quite extensive existing body of research in this broad field. In an effort to narrow down my focus within this vast field, I decided to delve deeper into the realm of animation, motivated by my personal interest and experience with this topic. Immersing myself in literature on children and animated media, I found that gender portrayal in and animated characters was a highlighted and recurring theme. However, most of these studies approached the topic primarily from a media-centric viewpoint, examining the media's effects and character influences on various aspects of children's lives (Gökçearslan, 2010; Coyne et al., 2016; Xu, 2021). For instance, Xu (2021) investigated the impact of female portrayals in animation on child viewers. Meanwhile, Coyne et al. (2016) delved into the detrimental effects of body image of female animated characters and their influence on girls' body images. The effects of animated characters have often been discussed in relation to the gender development of a child. In earlier days developmental approaches have been used in trying to define the relationship between children and gender (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Consequently, the majority of these studies were primarily situated in the research field of media studies or viewed through a gender-developmental lens, often lacking a comprehensive multidisciplinary perspective that acknowledges children's role in shaping their understanding of animation and gender (Gökçearslan, 2010; Coyne et al., 2016; Xu, 2021). Hence, aspects like the interpretation of animated characters and gender from children's perspectives have been rather unexplored (Furniss, 2012; Schiele et al., 2020; an Gökçearslan, 2010; Lamarre, 2009; Coyne et al., 2016; Xu, 2021; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Within the field of childhood studies, gender, however, has also been a rather neglected issue in comparison to other aspects like age, as stated by Bartholomaeus and Senkevics (2015).

Thus, I could uncover several research gaps. On one hand, there is limited research on gender and media from the perspective of children (Tobin, 2000; Duvall, 2010). On the other hand, gender is an aspect that is often neglected in the research field of childhood studies (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). It is also essential to highlight that most research on this topic has been done with young girls in an English speaking cultural

setting (Coyne et al., 2016). Expanding the cultural setting of this research topic to other countries is also essential for gaining a deeper understanding of this issue. For closing the gap in research, it is also important to do research with children of all genders on a topic that concerns them all while simultaneously giving children as participants possibilities to shape the research process.

## 1.3   Aim of the research and research questions

To contribute to filling the research gaps, this thesis aims to explore children's interpretation of animated characters. The aspect of the children's understanding of gender in these characters will be the focus of this research project. Therefore, following main research question has been posed:

*How do children make sense of animated characters in terms of gender?*

Given the breadth of this question and its potential interpretation across various aspects and understandings of gender, two sub-research questions have been formulated to explore specific areas in greater depth. While the first sub-question explores interpretations of characteristics in relation to gender, the second sub-question focuses on gender norms and how children negotiate these norms in their interpretations. The following are the two sub-questions outlined:

*How do children interpret the characteristics of animated characters related to gender?*

*How do children navigate gender norms through their interpretations of animated characters?*

This research project takes an approach that explores children and their understanding of gender in a way that goes beyond the effects of media. For exploring these research questions, qualitative research has been designed, to gain insight into this complex social phenomenon of gender, media and children. A theoretical framework has been developed for this project, drawing from childhood studies, media studies, and gender studies, to highlight important aspects such as children's agency, the social construction of childhood, and gender as performance. Hence, the research design combines the qualitative and participatory tools of visual stimuli interviews, ranking and drawing to assist exploring children's voices on a topic that concerns their daily lives. The research was conducted in Austria with 11 children between the ages of 10 to 13. For exploring children's interpretation and experiences, it is important to acknowledge the participants' voices on the topic. With the design of this research the children were able to shape the research through their participation and expertise. Because interpretations of gender in an animated character are shaped by the children's individual context and background, the children themselves were given the possibility to choose the animated characters they want to talk about, which also gave them the opportunity to assist in designing the research project. Gender is explored in both characters that the children like and dislike. The findings of this research project not only seek to contribute to the field of childhood studies but also possess relevance and potential implications for gender and media studies.

## 1.4   Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, each crafted to conduct an in-depth investigation into the topic, the research methodology and process, and the findings obtained, ultimately fostering a deeper comprehension of the subject matter. The first

chapter, the introductory chapter, provides an introduction into this project, an overview of the research context, the research problem as well as the aim of the research and related questions.

*The second chapter* offers an overview of the thesis's background including an exploration of its cultural and social context. Consequently, it delves into topics such as Austria, social and gender norms, childhood, and perspectives on children and media within the Austrian context. Furthermore, it provides insights into the historical and cultural dynamics of animation and gender, expanding into existing research and studies on the topic.

*The third chapter* discusses the theoretical framework of this thesis. Perspectives within the research fields of childhood studies, gender studies and media studies have shaped this research project. First, I present an overview of the field of childhood studies, focusing on childhood as a social construct and children's agency, particularly in relation to gender. Then, I explore children and gender within feminist-poststructuralist frameworks shaped by Butler's view on gender performativity. Lastly, when examining children, media and its interpretation, I present cultural studies approaches alongside feminist and queer audience studies to investigate diverse perspectives.

*The fourth chapter*, explores reflections and discussions on the methodological choices made in this thesis. First, an overall description of the qualitative methodological approach inspired by the aforementioned research fields will be provided. Subsequently, I delve into the fieldwork process, followed by describing the research design and participatory tools included, namely individual stimuli interviews, drawing exercises, and ranking activities. Ethical considerations pertaining to the research, data collection, and interpretation will also be addressed in this chapter. Finally, an overview of the methods utilized for data analysis will be presented.

*The fifth chapter* serves as a brief introduction to the children and the liked and disliked animated characters they have selected, serving as a launching point for the following analysis chapter.

*The sixth chapter*, the detailed analysis chapter, explores how children interpret animated characters in relation to gender. The chapter delves into children's talk about animated characters, understandings of gender and characteristics. Gender norms and language are also pivotal elements that are examined in detail.

*The seventh chapter* summarizes the main findings of this thesis, with a focus on exploring the posed research questions. Additionally, this final chapter includes concluding remarks on this research project, along with an examination of its strengths and limitations. Furthermore, suggestions for future research are presented to advance the understanding of this topic.

# 2 Background

In regard to this research project it is important to gain a deeper understanding of topics that will be explored as well as the context of this research. This chapter outlines a general overview of Austria as a country, its society and value systems. Various aspects and characteristics of childhood in Austria will also be discussed. A special interest lies in children and media as well as (media) education in Austria. Furthermore, animation, its definition, history and cultural importance will be explored. In addition, already conducted research on gender and animated characters will be discussed briefly. The aim of this chapter is to examine background information for this research project. The gained knowledge and information about the context should then assist in understanding the children, their interpretations and statements, particularly by recognizing how contextual factors shape their understandings and perspectives on gender in animated characters.

## 2.1 An introduction to Austria

Austria is a small landlocked country situated in south-central Europe. It is often known for its mountains and forests as well as for its rich culture and lengthy history. Together with Switzerland, Austria is often considered to be the neutral core of Europe, due to the country's political neutrality. Since 1995, Austria has also been part of the EU. In 2023, Austria is home for approximately 9 million inhabitants (Leichter et al., 2024). Austria's economy and history was heavily influenced by its location and its neighboring countries like Hungary, Italy and Germany. The country's history then also influenced Austria's culture and values. Historical events like both World Wars transformed not only the system and politics in the country but also the lives of many people as well as their views and values, catalyzing significant shifts in societal norms and perspectives (Scroope, 2018).

### 2.1.1 Austrian society

As mentioned before, Austria's culture has been shaped by its historical context, resulting in a diversity of traditions and cultures within its borders. The Austrian population comprises a blend of cultures influenced by migration or legally recognized minority groups, including Slovenes and Hungarians (Leichter et al., 2024; Scroope, 2018). Stating this, it is important to note that differences in culture, traditions or values within Austria might also affect views of childhood as well as the understanding of gender and gender roles. Both individualism and collectivism are essential concepts in Austria's society. Emphasis is placed on the individual and their action and on collectivism (Scroope, 2018). Collectivist societies emphasize the prioritization of the group's wellbeing, goals, shared ideas and values which can best be described with the German word "Gesellschaft". While it might be difficult to describe Austria as either individualist or collectivist, the country is, like other European countries, more marked by individualist ideas compared to more collectivist societies in for example some Asian and African contexts (Hofstede, 2001). Austrian's society, like many other societies in the Minority world, is based on egalitarianism (Scroope, 2018). Egalitarianism is understood as a concept of equality, stating that every citizen should be given the same rights and possibilities. Citizens are encouraged to participate in communication with the state as

well as with other equal citizens. This ideology then can also be found in political rights like the right to vote (Bourricaud, 1992). Additionally, the principles of egalitarianism manifest in Austria's social welfare system which includes the access to health care, free education as well as support for employment and retirement needs (Scroope, 2018). Even though Austria's society is considered to be egalitarian, class as well as hierarchical structures still can be found, especially in regard to cultural and historical knowledge and access to activities and events. In the last few decades, actions like implementing gender mainstreaming policies in various sectors, also have been taken to decrease inequality based on gender which have been successful but did not eradicate gender inequality (Leichter et al., 2024).

## 2.1.2 Social and gender norms in Austria

For centuries, the social sciences have sought to comprehend how people cooperate and how unspoken regulations have developed to shape their behaviors (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). Human coexistence is shaped by a multitude of social norms, each carrying varying degrees of significance and weight. Social norms foster a framework of mutually corresponding expectations, which serve as guiding principles for behavior in specific social situations. Examples of social norms include customs, traditions, etiquette, religious principles, moral standards, and legal regulations (Diekmann, 2020). Cislaghi and Heise (2019) name three important characteristics for social norms. First, there is a distinction between personal believes and social norms. Whereas personal beliefs and attitudes are individual and internal judgments about something, social norms are beliefs about what others do and approve of. Second, social norms are situated in a specific cultural context and are thus varying on an individual and their contexts. Third, some scholars also argue that norms can also have the power to influence independent actions that are carried out without collaboration (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). Ammerer (2016) states that Austrian's pluralistic society could not function without social norms and values, due to their impact on democratic core values. Social norms have been in the light of (political) discussions in various contexts in Austria like the Covid-19 Pandemic (Diekmann, 2020) or immigration and multicultural societies (Ammerer, 2016). Due to their cultural and historical contexts, values and norms also undergo local differences and temporal changes (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019).

According to Popitz (2006) norms can also typify individuals, actions, and situations, which leads to social roles individuals are expected to adopt. Distinguishing individuals into different social roles based on various categories of people can lead to role conflicts, as everyone typically occupies multiple roles simultaneously (Popitz, 2006). These roles or norms can also apply to only a specific group of people being characterized by criteria. This can also imply to gender. According to Cislaghi and Heise (2019), norms are just one component of the gender system, along with gender roles, gender socialization, and gendered power dynamics. In this context, gender norms are social regulations and expectations. Gender norms are an essential concept of this thesis and research project. They will be explored in more detail in chapter 3.2. But I do want to give insight now, on how gender norms are intertwined in Austria's society. Gender norms in Austria encompass a blend of traditional values and evolving societal expectations. Throughout history, Austria has been characterized by a model of distinct gender roles, particularly within nuclear families, where men typically serve as breadwinners while women primarily undertake domestic responsibilities and childcare. Additionally, binary gender norms regarding how men and women are expected to act and look have also been present (Ammerer, 2016). The country's constitutional framework worked towards

gender equality, wanting to ensure that women and men are treated fairly in societal interactions and that gender norms are becoming more egalitarian (Gönenç et al., 2015). Measures taken included anti-discrimination laws and policies aimed at bolstering women's involvement in the workforce (Bundeskanzleramt Österreich, 2023). Despite these efforts, persistent challenges such as the gender pay gap and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles underscore the ongoing need to fully confront and transform traditional gender norms within Austrian society (Buber-Ennser, 2015; Gönenç et al., 2015). The conventional concept of separate gender roles especially concerning work, family, and lifestyle dynamics is still persistent. Although the government has made efforts to foster a more equitable distribution of these roles, this traditional paradigm endures. However, it is also crucial to note that norms are ever changing (Buber-Ennser, 2015; Gönenç et al., 2015).

Social norms and gender norms do not only apply to adults living in a society but also to children. Arnett (2000) conducted research in Austria focusing on adolescents and young adults, exploring sense-making of social norms, childhood and adulthood. The findings indicate that Austrian participants tend to view childhood and adulthood as separate phases in the life of an Austrian citizen. Thus, the transition from childhood to adulthood is perceived as a quest for identity before settling into more traditional adult roles and social norms such as marriage, parenthood, and employment. Despite the persistence of many traditional social and gender norms, some young individuals perceive them to be increasingly flexible. The understanding of what it means to be an adult in Austria is closely intertwined with perceptions of what it means to be a child. Therefore, the subsequent section delves into childhood in Austria (Sirsch et al., 2009).

### 2.1.3 Childhood in Austria

The question of what childhood is and who can be considered to be a child often seems like a simple question. Scholars, however, disagree, stating that childhood can be understood as a social construct, which is shaped by a particular cultural context (James & Prout, 2015). The social constructionist view of childhood will be explained in a later chapter (see chapter 3.1.1) in more detail; for now – when discussing childhood in an Austrian context – it is important to note that childhood is shaped and influenced by cultural discourses and practices (Kränzl-Nagl & Mierendorff, 2007). Due to the fact that childhood can be understood in various contexts, different definitions of childhood and children have emerged. One prominent definition was stated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, also known under its acronym UNCRC. The UNCRC was created in 1989 and is one of the most ratified conventions in the world. It encompasses 54 articles, where Article 1 is the definition of the child. As stated in the UNCRC, a child is considered to be a person under the age of 18 years (United Nations, 1989). Applying this definition, 1.76 million children were living in Austria in 2023, which accounted for around 19% of Austria's total population (Statista, 2024). Even though Austrian society and politics place huge values on children's rights, the country has had a rather difficult time implementing those rights. In 1992 the UNCRC was ratified by Austria, but it has not been granted as a constitutional act like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Filler, 2019). In recent decades, children's rights have been increasingly implemented in Austrian law and have also been receiving more attention politically. Topics and rights addressed included the right to protection and care, children's well-being and participation, the prohibition of child labor and violence, and the prohibition of discrimination against children with disabilities, as well as the prohibition of violence in children's upbringing (Filler, 2019). The children's right and  entitlement to education has

consistently held a fundamental place within Austria's societal system of values and social norms. The right to free education as well as to learning materials is accessible to every child. Compulsory attendance in educational institutions was introduced in 1774 (Scroope, 2018). The aim of Austria's education system is for children to discover their strengths, talents, and acquire lifelong skills by the end of their schooling. As stated by the ministry of education (2023) children are active members of society and should therefore also know and exercise their rights to participation in Austria's democracy. Interesting to note is also that fact, that even all citizens have the same rights, children's right seem to be an exception and different to those from adults' (Walker, 2023).

Most children in Austria grow up with their nuclear family (Walker, 2023). The nuclear family consists of parents and their children with the father often serving as the family's leading role (Scroope, 2018). The extended family like grandparents however still plays an important role in many Austrian households (Walker, 2023). Families often rely on their network, especially in concerns of children. It is therefore a common situation when grandparents help raise the children as well as take care of them (Scroope, 2018). In Austrian society, family is considered to be important, making it one of the core aspects of Austrian's value system and everyday lives (Walker, 2023). This aspect as well as the importance of childhood can also be found in Austria's welfare system. Austria's welfare system supports children for example through universal childcare, financial aid for parents and children, and healthcare coverage (Scroope, 2018; Walker, 2023). In addition to education and family, children's leisure time also plays an important role in childhood. While growing up, Austrian children are usually granted autonomy, being able to spend time alone. Spending time outdoors is often heavily encouraged due to the belief that children are able to learn many essential skills that they need in their later life. Spending time indoors is often frowned upon, especially when it includes digital media like playing video games or watching TV (Walker, 2023). While meeting up with friends, playing and doing sports are the most common leisure activities, the interaction with digital media has also gained popularity among children (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022).

### 2.1.4 Children and media in Austria

Media has become an important part in the daily lives of many children living in Austria. According to the KIM-Studie (2022) – the biggest study about children and media in the German-speaking world – children engage with media on a daily basis. This study explores both digital and analog media consumption, encompassing various forms such as books, the internet, smartphones and video game consoles. However, the majority of statistics and discussions focusses on digital media. 67% of the over 1,200 participating children between the ages 6 to 13 years old watch TV daily whereas 48% of them use their smartphone every day. For children aged 12 to 19, the amount of time spent daily using digital media is even greater (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022). Although, according to the EU Kids Online's European-wide survey (2020), German-speaking countries rank in the middle range compared to leaders like Norway or Malta in terms of the average time children spend online daily, the increased digital media usage, sparked various discussions in Austria (Smahel et al., 2020). Parents, educators, and social commentators have frequently expressed concerns about the potential harm to children through media consumption. These assertions have primarily centered on the concerns of adults regarding media, presupposing that children passively and unquestioningly absorb media images and messages (Drotner, 2009; Hadley & Nenga, 2004).

Regarding children and the media, there are a number of separate policies and frameworks in Austria's media landscape. Those regulations and policies are built around empowering children as well as protecting them when engaging with media (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2022). Even though the aspect of empowerment is mentioned in some of the actions, safety however dominates the discussion on children and media in Austria. It is also important to note, that even though children sometimes are included in the policy process, the majority of policies and safety measures have been created and implemented by adults (Saferinternet.at, 2024). Regarding the concern about children and their abilities to navigate through and engage with the media, "Digital Education" has been introduced as a mandatory and separate school subject for students from the 5th to the 8th school level in 2022. This subject should teach children about digital technologies, their role in society as well as how they can interact with them. The class "Digital Education" should also be a preparation for the subject "Informatics", in which the topic gets explored more in depth. For children in elementary school – from 1st to 4th level – digital learning is included in other subjects but not yet taught in a separate class (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2022). For all school levels, digital education is considered to be an overall important topic that should be elaborated on in all school subjects (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2022). Similar to digital education, gender competence is also a topic that is discussed in schools throughout many subjects. The goal of these lessons on gender competence is for both children and teachers to learn to counteract gender stereotypes and gender inequalities, which should subsequently enable a communal living together (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung, 2022). Although gender competence is also linked to digital media competence, these topics are only occasionally combined and addressed together in Austrian schools.

Due to various perceptions and assumptions of childhood, children are frequently perceived as a unique audience with distinct characteristics and needs in comparison to adults. Thus, the definition of child audience emerged (Buckingham, 2009; Drotner, 2009). Especially in research of television consumption, the term child audience has been shaped by both positive and negative connotations. While in the early era of television, the educational potential of television for children has been highlighted; the contemporary discussion is shaped by regulating television programs in concern of children (Buckingham, 2009). Discourses expressing concerns about children's digital media use often exhibit gender biases. Public anxiety about aggressive behavior due to gaming is typically associated with boys and young men, while concerns about visual sexual abuse and bodily harm are framed as issues primarily affecting girls. These distinctions partly arise from gendered media practices and longstanding gendered traditions (Drotner, 2009). With the rise in children's media consumption, there has been a corresponding increase in opportunities for them to interact with animated content, characters, and the gendered narratives portrayed within animation. The upcoming section will provide a comprehensive overview of the intersection of animation and gender and the existing body of research on this topic.

## 2.2 Animation and gender

Animation is a term that holds a significant presence in contemporary language (Bruckner, 2011). The term can be found in almost every aspect of life, whether it is in an educational context, daily life, or media studies. Due to the fact that the term is not affiliated with one specific discipline, its definition and understanding varies on the field

and the context it is used in (Furniss, 2012). For this research project, it is therefore important to take a closer look at what animation can be and what definition will be used in the context of this research. In this thesis, the later used term animation refers to digital animation.

### 2.2.1 A short introduction to animation

The term "animation" is nowadays mostly connected to digital media and is associated with cartoons, webcomics, movies, video games and more (Furniss, 2012). The term is often also understood as a type of medium and is therefore often associated with a genre for films, series and videogames (Silvio, 2010). The word animation derives from the Latin term "anima", which can be translated as "breath" and is often understood as bringing something to life (Bruckner, 2011). The definition of (digital) animation has majorly been shaped by film and media studies. Digital animation, however, is only a small and recently developed part on the spectrum of animation (Wells, 1998). Puppetry and play can also be linked to animation where objects are coming to life. These acts shape and represent cultural concepts of personhood. Animation therefore can be considered to be a big part of play, especially in early childhood. This connection between puppetry, play, and animation highlights human's attribution of life and agency to inanimate objects. In each of these forms, objects go beyond their physical attributes to symbolize characters. For example, a puppet or a toy may symbolize a specific character, embodying traits and behaviors that reflect cultural values or narratives. In the context of digital animation, this notion of objects coming to life and interacting with their surroundings plays a central role. Animated characters in digital media function as vessels through which storytellers convey narratives embedded in a specific cultural context (Silvio, 2010).

Digital animation involves the creation of visual illusions using lines and shapes (Wells, 1998). Similar to film, animation essentially comprises a series of images. Various techniques are employed to animate motion, including the traditional Frame by Frame method, where successive drawings or photographs are utilized (Bruckner, 2011). Cel animation, a traditional paper-based form, dominated the scene until the 1990s (Cavalier, 2011). However, the emergence of computer technology has brought about a revolution in animation, introducing methods such as computer-generated content (both 2D and 3D), claymation, stop-motion, and paper cut-out animation (Silvio, 2010). Despite its occasional association with children's media due to the perceived charm of its characters, animation's audience is not limited to children (Wells, 1998; Silvio, 2010). This misconception is challenged within the realm of film studies, underscoring animation's broader significance beyond its perceived innocence (Wells, 1998).

While the American animation industry has been influential in its development, animation has also flourished in diverse regions worldwide, each with its own unique styles and techniques shaped by cultural contexts. In western Europe, animation has predominantly served artistic purposes, while in eastern Europe, it faced political restrictions but thrived with significant state funding, resulting in consistent production (Cavalier, 2011). Asia, particularly Japan, emerged as a prominent hub for animation, with its industry evolving similarly to that of the US. Animation history literature often focuses on works from the USA and Japan due to their global recognition (Cavalier, 2011). However, globalization and increased accessibility to digital animation have facilitated the consumption of animated content from diverse cultural backgrounds (Furniss, 2012).

## 2.2.2 Animation in a cultural context

Scholars state that the cultural, historical and societal contexts of certain animated products such as movies or video games influence the global field of animation. Nick Park's "Wallace & Gromit" movies (Great Britain, 1990s) as well as Hayao Miyazaki's work with Studio Ghibli like "My Neighbor Totoro" (Japan, 20th and 21st century) are only a few examples of animation that are said to be embedded in the culture of the land it has been produced in. Park focuses on British culture while Miyazaki explores Japanese culture (Furniss, 2012). Exploring and portraying different cultures through animation provides a valuable opportunity to gain insight into diverse societies and traditions. However, this practice also raises important considerations about cultural representation and identity. Furniss (2012) highlights that while depicting various cultures on a global scale offers a chance for cross-cultural understanding, it also invites scrutiny of cultural stereotypes and the preservation of cultural authenticity. On the other hand, Lamarre (2009) offers a contrasting perspective, cautioning against an overemphasis on cultural settings in animated films, suggesting that this approach can inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce cultural determinism, where animation is viewed merely as a reflection of a country's culture and values. This perspective underscores the complexity of representing cultures in animation and emphasizes the need for nuanced approaches that balance authenticity with sensitivity to cultural diversity. Even though the historical and cultural context of an animation is important to be considered when trying to understand the animated media, it is however even more important to not portray it as its only characteristic. Animation due to its extensive production is often co-produced and therefore also produced in more than just one country and by people with different cultural backgrounds (Lamarre, 2009).

Due to the research site of this project being Austria, it is relevant to take a brief look at the Austrian animation scene. At the beginning of the 20th century, animation was brought to the Austrian film industry. During the World Wars, animated movies have mostly been used for war propaganda (Dewald et. al, 2010). In the 1920s, Austrian cinematography and animation was at its peak, due to its success and popularity in Austrian society. However, due to the increasing competition by American animation studios like Disney, combined with historical occurrences, Austria's film industry collapsed (Bruckner, 2011). Even though there has been a little upswing in the 1950s, where animation was mostly used for commercial purposes like advertisements, it did not survive in the field of films and cinema. Animation did, however, find another place to be used in, which was art. Experimental Animation is animation used for art and artistic creations. This is the only form of animation that still gets produced in Austria today (Dewald et al., 2010). It is crucial to note Austria's limited production of animation when exploring children's interpretation of animation and its characters. As mentioned before, animation is embedded in a cultural context and thus contains cultural values, norms, and perspectives embedded within the narrative and visual elements. Since Austria produces almost no animated content, much of the animation consumed by Austrian children originates from other countries, the most prominent being the United States or Japan. Thus, Austrian children are often exposed to animation that reflects cultural values and narratives different from their own (Dewald et al., 2010; Wells, 1998).

Animation also plays a big role in today's pop culture (Cavalier, 2011). Viewers make sense of animation when they interact not only with the visual content but also with its connection to pop cultures and specific subcultures (Lamarre, 2009). While pop culture in the 20th century was mostly dominated by human icons like actors and actresses, singers or public figures, there has also been a shift in the last few decades that also

views animated characters increasingly as icons (Silvio, 2010). The possibilities of digital media, especially the internet, makes it easier for fans to engage with such subcultures and thus animated characters (Furniss, 2012). These fan activities can be found not only online but also offline for example in conventions or merchandise marketing including products produced to a certain animated media. Those products like figurines and stuffed animals often play an important role in certain subcultures and fandoms (Silvio, 2010). Performance and representations can also be connected to animated characters. Performing can include dressing up as a character, which is often referred to as cosplay (short for costume play) (Lamarre, 2009). Animated characters are often also used for representing oneself. Especially in online communities, characters, often called avatars, are considered to be representations of the user's self (Silvio, 2010). With the importance and role of animation growing there has also been an interest in research regarding the effects it has on users and viewers (Furniss, 2012). Karnjanapoomi (2022) and other scholars state that interactions with animated characters can lead to parasocial relationships. The concept of parasocial phenomena, introduced by Horton and Wohl in 1956, refers to the mediated relationships that media consumers form with media personas. While Horton and Wohl's (1956) initial research focused on TV characters, parasocial relationships have evolved with the advent of digital media, including animated characters. Parasocial relationships are commonly perceived as one-sided, where the viewer feels a sense of connection with a person or character, but this connection is not reciprocated (Karnjanapoomi, 2022). In regard to the relationship between viewers and animated characters, Silvio (2010, p. 429) states the following: "The relationship between fan and animated character tends to be read in terms of alterity rather than affinity; animated characters are not so much introjected role models as psychically projected objects of desire." As this quote explores the dynamic between fans and animated characters, Silvio (2010) argues that fans do not necessarily see themselves reflected in these characters but rather attribute their own desires and fantasies onto them. Animated characters become vessels for fans to project their aspirations, fantasies, and desires, serving as objects of fascination and admiration rather than as relatable figures. This concept has been extensively examined in the context of Japanese animation and its audience of young male viewers (Silvio, 2010). Other sources disagree, stating that animated characters can sometimes be considered to be role models by children (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2022; Karnjanapoomi, 2022).

### 2.2.3 Animation and gender

While animation and gender hold significance within the theoretical framework of this study and will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters, I will provide a brief overview and essential background information on previously conducted studies on this topic. Due to the growing presence of animation in many societies, the aspect of gender and its representation has piqued the interest of researchers. Previous research, however, has predominantly utilized content analyses to explore images that are conveyed by media, as well as effect studies to assess how these images influence children (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Numerous studies have been conducted on the representation of female animated characters as well as their portrayal and effects on (female) viewers (Schiele et al., 2020; an Gökçearslan, 2010; Lamarre, 2009; Coyne et al., 2016; Xu, 2021; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Research has also delved into the portrayal of male, queer, and anthropomorphic characters (Wells, 1998; Lamarre, 2009; and Gökçearslan, 2010). Nevertheless, the quantity of such studies remains limited compared to characters that conform to binary gender norms (Wells, 1998). Research shows that the design of an

animated character influences the way the character and its gender is perceived. On one hand it includes artistic choices like color pallets and shades (Wells, 1998). On the other hand, however, it also includes how physique and the actions of a character are designed (Wells, 1998; Lankoski et al., 2003; Schiele et al., 2020). The latter aspect of design choices is often influenced by cultural and gender stereotypes (Parlakyildiz et al., 2022). Male characters are often portrayed as being more dominant, active, and aggressive, while female characters are portrayed as less significant, more passive, and often limited to domestic roles (an Gökçearslan, 2010). There have been other examples in recent years, where male and female representation has evolved and shifted (Schiele et al., 2020; Lamarre, 2009). These representations are found to not only have an influence on the likability of a character (Akça & Koç Çilekçiler, 2019) but it is also stated that the portrayal has an effect on children's understanding and perception of gender (Türkmen, 2021; Schiele et al., 2020; Duvall, 2010). Although negative effects are often highlighted, some studies also reveal positive effects of media like educational or personal benefits (Corsaro, 2017; Drotner, 2009). The examples of studies on gender and animated characters show that the majority of research examines this issue from the perspective of the media, trying to explore its effects on the viewers (Hadley & Nenga, 2004).

Scholars such as Durkin (in Buckingham, 2009) and Hamilton and Dynes (2023) recognize that media frequently portrays stereotypical gender roles, but they refute the notion that users passively and subconsciously internalize these stereotypes (Buckingham, 2009). Therefore, research that includes children's perspectives and interpretations on animation has become increasingly relevant. The number of such studies is still small compared to effect studies or content analyses (Türkmen, 2021; Tobin, 2000; Duvall, 2010). Hamilton and Dynes (2023) for example examine how children understand gender within animated characters and merchandise by the animation study Disney. By using interpretative phenomenological methodology, the study explores how children aged five to eight years interpret and navigate gender, gender norms as well as gender roles in animated characters. The results of this study highlight that children's discourse on gender is shaped by the key factors of physical appearance and gendered behaviors (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Duvall (2010) interviewed young girls in the United States to explore their interactions while watching animated content together. In their interviews, they discussed themes like gender and the role of female friendships in children's lives. The findings of the interviews suggest that the participants simultaneously accept both gender-role differences and gender equality (Duvall, 2010). Children's talk and perspectives on popular media have been examined by Tobin (2000) who conducted focus groups to gain insight into children's discussions on media representations of aspects such as gender, violence and class. These studies are just a few examples that deal with children's perspectives on gender and animation, which have theoretically and methodologically shaped this research project. Corsaro (2017) states that despite these findings, there remains a gap in understanding how children see, appropriate, use, and extend information from the animated media. Thus, it is also crucial to highlight that the interpretation of animated characters is part of human behavior and includes more than just the aspect of gender (Wells, 1998; Lankoski et al., 2003).

## 2.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided details about the background of this research project, which will be necessary in understanding the cultural context of this research. First, Austria, the

country in which the research has taken place was discussed. Austrian society, which has been shaped by the country's history, is characterized by a blend of egalitarianism and individualism, with an emphasis on equal rights, participation and a social welfare system. Thus, social and gender norms also play an important role in the country's society. Next, I delved into childhood in Austria and how it is viewed within an Austrian context. Children's rights, education, family structures and its significance in the child's upbringing have been discussed as well. I then elaborated on children and media in Austria and how the discourse on it is shaped by protective perspectives. Children and their rights in relation to media have also been discussed, with a focus on children's empowerment and media education in Austria. Animated content has gained an importance in children's everyday lives. A short history on animation showed that even though it has primarily developed in the US, animated media has also been developed in other parts of the world like Asia or Europe. It is therefore also crucial to look at the cultural context in which animation has been created. Animation's presence in pop culture has grown, with animated characters becoming icons, contributing to fandoms, subcultures, and parasocial relationships. Lastly, I delved into the relation between animation and gender and how this topic has been explored in previous studies. The majority of studies focused on effects of animation and gender on children, thus researching from a media effects perspective. Limited studies have been conducted from the children's perspectives. Previous research on children's interpretation of gender and animated characters highlights the complexity of this process and how it is embedded in a cultural and social context.

# 3 Theoretical framework

This chapter aims to present a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework guiding this thesis. This research is situated in three overlapping research fields: childhood studies will be presented as the main research field with its focus on the concept of social constructionism as well as children's agency. Subsequently, I will delve into the field of gender studies and theoretical perspectives like performativity, poststructuralist approaches to gender and gender norms. Finally, I will discuss theoretical perspectives on children and media, including the research field of media studies. I will slightly touch on theoretical frameworks when researching children and media including cultural studies and the reception studies. The interdisciplinary approach and thus the combination of the above mentioned research fields and concepts, will provide a fitting theoretical framework for exploring children as active sensemakers regarding media, especially in relation to animation and gender.

## 3.1 The paradigm of childhood studies

This child-centered research project positions itself within the research field of childhood studies. Over the last few centuries, the (societal) image and understanding of children and childhoods have been ever transforming. Questions have been raised regarding whether childhood is a natural or a social phenomenon, leading to an exploration of varying perspectives across different historical epochs and cultural milieus (James & James, 2012; Prout, 2011). Research on childhood shows that its understanding is embedded in a specific cultural, social and historical context. Thus, this research field has challenged the traditional notion of childhood as being natural (Abebe, 2019). Philippe Ariès has conducted research on children's portrayal in historical artifacts like paintings (James & Prout, 2015). His findings for example show that children were seen as little adults in the middle ages (Montgomery, 2003). Children and childhood has also been explored in other research fields like anthropology, sociology and psychology (Hammersley, 2017; James & Prout, 2015). Especially Piaget's works, anchored in developmental psychology, provided an approach that dominated an earlier understanding of children. According to his theories, the development of children can be divided into various stages. At the end of these stages is the acquisition of logical competence that children are supposed to attain when becoming adults (James & Prout, 2015; Woodhead, 2013). This view assumes that the stages are natural, universal and therefore applicable to every child equally. Piaget's work also suggests that children, depending on the stage, are incompetent and can only fully develop their logical abilities at the end of these stages. As argued by researchers within childhood studies, such views often portray children as human becomings waiting passively for the integration in an adult-shaped and adult-dominated society (Hammersley, 2017). Although Piaget's theories as well as other developmental approaches were widespread, some voices in various research fields raised criticisms against these theories and approaches (James & Prout, 2015). Thomson (2007) and James and Prout (2015) state that views on children being incompetent and thus perceiving them as becomings, led to children's marginalization within society as well as the supremacy of adulthood. The historical marginalization of children in an adult-based society led to the emergence of the new paradigm of childhood studies in the 1980s and 90s (James, 2007; Tisdall & Punch,

2012). Within the research field of childhood studies, perspectives on childhood have been shifted into a socially and culturally constructed concept in which children are now viewed as human beings and social actors with their own right of being properly studied (James & James, 2012).

Childhood studies is an interdisciplinary field, drawing on various disciplines, research fields and approaches (Lange & Mierendorff, 2009; Prout, 2011). Children's own agency and participation in society has often been neglected within these other fields of research (James & Prout, 2015). Thus, six key features were introduced by James and Prout (2015) to childhood studies, shortly after this new field emerged. Even to this day, the key features play an eminent and central role in childhood studies. Due to the key features also shaping this research project and how children are positioned within it, I will now elaborate on them in more detail: Firstly, the concept of childhood is seen as a social construct. This thought challenges the idea that childhood is natural and universal. This key concept therefore emphasizes the variety of childhood depending on structures and culture. Closely related with structures and culture are variables such as class, ethnicity, race, and gender that shape the construction of childhood. These aspects, as stated in the second key feature, are influencing the notion of childhood. It is therefore highlighted that childhood is a culturally diverse phenomenon rather than a universally standardized one. Thirdly, there is a recognition that children and childhood should be studied in their own right. The view on children as "human beings", rather than "human becomings", emphasizes the importance of valuing children as individuals in their own right rather than viewing them solely in the context of becoming adults. The fourth aspect underscores that children actively participate as subjects in their daily lives and therefore are contributing to the construction and reconstruction of society as well as childhood itself. The fifth feature underscores the utility of ethnography as a valuable tool in researching with children, enabling their voices to be heard and promoting their active participation. Lastly, the sixth feature highlights the development of a new paradigm in the study of children and childhood as a contribution to shaping and reshaping societal constructions of childhood (James & Prout, 2015).

### 3.1.1 Childhood as a social construct

The feature that childhood is socially constructed is highly emphasized within the field of childhood studies. This view on childhood is based on social constructionism; a theoretical framework that encompasses many aspects of the social lives of human beings. Due to social constructionism being used in many different research fields like sociology, media studies as well as childhood studies, there is not one single definition for this theoretical perspective (Burr, 2015). In their work "Key concepts in childhood studies", James und James (2012, p. 116) however provide a definition for social constructionism and describe it as "A theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which 'reality' is negotiated in everyday life through people's interactions and through sets of discourses". As highlighted by this definition, this theoretical perspective suggests that reality is not objective or predetermined but rather constructed by individuals who collectively create meaning of what is considered to be real within their social contexts (James & James, 2012). This reality includes many social aspects like concepts and social norms. This constructed reality thus shapes how individuals perceive their world and environment. It is therefore also important to note that these constructions are embedded and shaped by cultural and historical circumstances and aspects of the society one individual engages with (Burr, 2015; Montgomery, 2003). The process of making and creating meaning and reality is continuous and dynamic, as noted by James and James

(2012). This process not only results in varying realities across different societies but also within the same society, for example by differences regarding gender or class. Burr (2015) adds that it is essential for social constructionism to challenge knowledge and the perception of the world, highlighting that the reality and truth is collectively constructed by interactions and thus also linguistic acts. Hence, this theoretical perspective highlights the role of language, symbols, and shared meanings in shaping perceptions of reality (Hook, 2001). The term "discourse" has been heavily shaped by Foucault's (1981) work who states that linguistics acts and language is used to produce knowledge and power. Foucault (1981) argued that discourse is not simply about conveying information, but rather that it shapes an individual's perceived reality (Hook, 2001). Aspects like knowledge and power are closely intertwined with discourse. According to Nola (1998), discourses can be understood as systems of knowledge and power that operate within a society and thus highlights how language, both verbal and non-verbal, is used within a specific social, cultural, and historical context. Discourse and power operate through both subtle and overt mechanisms. Thus, the discourses embedded in power structures can reinforce existing realities and social norms but can also shape the identity of individuals within a society (Hook, 2001; Nola, 1998). Social constructionism connected to Foucault's analysis of discourse can offer theoretical perspectives for understanding how individuals create meaning and how it is intertwined with language, knowledge, power and social and cultural contexts (Hook, 2001; James & James, 2012).

According to perspectives within childhood studies and social constructionism, childhood is not universal and shaped by biological features but rather produced by individuals and formed by cultural, historical and local aspects (Montgomery, 2003). Philippe Ariès (1965) was one of the earlier experts who acknowledged childhood's cultural and historical construction. Through his work of analyzing historical artifacts like paintings, he highlighted the transformation of childhood and emphasized differences in how children were depicted over time (James & Prout, 2015). Ariès (1965) argued that children were seen as little adults in the middle ages and that childhood and adulthood, therefore, were not seen as two separate stages of life but rather as one; its understanding being dominated by adulthood. With society's change over time, Ariès (1965) also concluded that childhood had transformed over time. Particularly in the 17th century, as Ariès (1965) suggests, there was a notable shift wherein childhood gradually became conceptualized by adults. This happened due to the shift of children's position in society. Even though his work has been critiqued for oversimplifying childhood or denying the fact that childhood has existed before the 17th century, his contributions have shaped how childhood is perceived today. His emphasis on the cultural and temporal influence on childhood has been an essential argument in understanding how childhood is constructed within a certain time and place (Montgomery, 2003; James & Prout, 2015). Perspectives on childhood often encompass various aspects such as expectations regarding children and their abilities, such as contrasting notions of children as capable and competent versus vulnerable. Prout (2011) highlights the dynamics and plurality of constructed childhoods even within a single society. In regard to how children are viewed within a society, it is crucial to highlight that these perceptions are embedded in power structures and thus often get shaped by adults (James & Prout, 2015). Researchers within childhood studies also acknowledge and emphasize children's agency and their part in shaping the notion of childhood (James & Prout, 2015). These aspects have been crucial when designing this research project. Through this lens, research can recognize the intricate and diverse nature of childhood, encompassing language, power dynamics, and the varied experiences of children, all while acknowledging their agency in shaping the

conditions of their own childhood. Thus, children's own social agency - encompassing their active engagement and construction of their lives - plays a crucial role in shaping the knowledge of childhood (James, 2011; James & Prout, 2015).

### 3.1.2 Children and agency

Closely tied to childhood studies and social constructionism, is the perception of children as social actors. This theoretical perspective argues that children interact with and contribute to shaping their own worlds, emphasizing their capacity to act independently (James & James, 2012). Hence, they are human beings and agents with agency that enables them to engage and participate within society (Robson et al., 2007). James and Prout (2015, p. 8) acknowledge children's active engagement and interaction with their world while simultaneously shaping their environments. James and James (2012) discuss the growing significance of the concept for childhood studies. On one hand, it bridges the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies with other research domains. On the other hand, it highlights alternative and emerging perspectives that can become increasingly important in exploring childhood (James & James, 2012).

Agency as a concept is not a stable feature. Rather, it transforms and is influenced by the time and place an individual is in. According to Robson et al. (2007), children's agency, particularly in its exercise and extent, varies depending on the situation a child encounters. Other researchers like Abebe (2019) add that it is also crucial to view agency as a complex concept which should be examined in light of its context and dynamic while it's also embedded in a social construct and generational power structures (Abebe, 2019). In sociology, scholars like Giddens (in James & Prout, 2015) have contributed to the structure-agency debate by intertwining agency with power and social structures (James & Prout, 2015). Both structure and agency are pivotal in shaping perceptions of children. However, due to children's generational position vis-à-vis adults, their agency is often overlooked by adults (Abebe, 2019). These power dynamics and social structures significantly influence how children are perceived and act within society (James & James, 2012). Children's agency undergoes continuous negotiation with the individuals they engage with across diverse contexts. They exhibit both independence and dependence concurrently (Abebe, 2019). Thus, it is crucial to note that childhood, children and their agency are influenced by various aspects in an individual's life like culture, interactions with adults or time and place (Hammersley, 2017; Prout, 2011).

Recent research in childhood studies has thoroughly examined children and their agency across diverse spheres such as family, workforce, and education (Abebe, 2019). Additionally, studies on ethnicity and gender reveal the active role children play in reproducing discourses, particularly in negotiating and expressing gender identities. This phenomenon has been emphasized by researchers such as Hamilton & Dynes (2023) and Kostas (2016). Given the focus of this research project on children and gender, childhood studies emerges as a fitting research field and theoretical framework. By blending the perspective of children as social actors with the perspectives of social constructionism, it is suitable for navigating the complexity of childhood, including its associated social constructs and power structures. In exploring the intersection of gender and media, particular focus is directed towards language and socially constructed norms. Furthermore, this theoretical framework acknowledges children's agency in shaping gender identities. The forthcoming sub-chapter will delve into the interconnectedness of gender and childhood within childhood studies and gender studies will discuss their significance for the research project's theoretical framework.

## 3.2 Gender and childhood studies

As stated in one of the key features in childhood studies by James and Prout (2015), childhood is intertwined with variables like class, ethnicity and gender. Thus, gender is one of the aspects shaping children's lived experiences. Within childhood studies, gender is often mentioned in relation to differences between boys and girls and is therefore perceived to be a binary concept. Thus, Bartholomaeus and Senkevics (2015) argue that a critical perspective on gender in childhood studies is currently absent. Gender and children were first explored in the late 1980s and early 1990s through a feminist perspective. Davies (2003) and Walkerdine (1990) for example conducted studies on gender, children and literature, whereas Thorne (1993) explored children, gender and play. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of work done on gender and children. Although this subject has gained researchers' attention, little research has been published in childhood studies journals. Within childhood studies, the interdisciplinary interaction with gender and feminist studies has been mentioned by prominent scholars; it has, however, barely been elaborated on, and often remains untheorized. In major parts of current work in childhood studies, gender appears to be a rather less important aspect of childhood; in comparison to other concepts like age and generations (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015).

Earlier work on children and gender has been influenced by structural and developmental approaches. Bussey and Bandura (in Hamilton & Dynes, 2023) suggested that children learn about gender through social agents like peers, families as well as images portrayed within media. This approach argues that children are socialized into gender. A similar theoretical framework, the gender schema theory, states that children make meaning of gender within their surroundings that leads to their understanding of what it means to be a woman or a man. Cognitive theories of gender development are frameworks that propose that the understanding of gender gets acquired at a certain age and a certain stage of life (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). These mentioned approaches, however, have been critically debated within childhood studies. Scholars like Hamilton and Dynes (2023) note that children are not viewed as competent agents within these theoretical frameworks, but rather as passive individuals. Reddington (2020) agrees, adding that it is essential to not pinpoint the acquisition of gender to a specific stage and age in children's life, but rather understand gender through children's experiences with their surroundings and other individuals. The negotiation of gender should therefore be viewed as a complex process; especially for children who do not fit societal norms (Reddington, 2020). Osgood and Giugni (2015) also call for frameworks that should acknowledge the role that non-human objects like toys and surroundings play in the process of gender acquisition. Gender, therefore, gets a multidimensional nature that is dynamic and is shifting over time and place (Osgood & Giugni, 2015).

The majority of research on gender and children in the field of childhood studies has been done in Early Childhood Education. There, unstructured play as well as how children engage with gender in play has been a rather well explored research topic (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Reddington, 2020). Research exploring the intersections of play, children and gender has been shaped by feminist theories. These theories highlight the fluid and contextual nature of gender, the influence of gender-related ideas on children's play as well as the presence of power dynamics within and between genders (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015; Kelly-Ware, 2016). Children typically develop a set of beliefs about gender, while being exposed to gender norms from a very young age. Play, therefore, has a crucial role in

comprehending the construction of gender among children. By the age of four or five, children are already aware of gendered play. Girls are expected to engage with dolls, beauty products, and domestic items, while boys are encouraged to play with action figures, construction toys, and sports-related items are common views across children. Differences in play can also be observed in the sites where and how children play. Studies in Brazil as well as Australia show that while boys tend to play outdoors and do sports, girls often spend their leisure time indoors (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). This early exposure leads to the development of gender-typed behavior, with many children avoiding the interaction with toys designed for the opposite gender (Reddington, 2020) or expressing a preference for playing with peers of the same gender (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Simultaneously gender binaries are reinforcing, contributing to the internalization of gender-stereotypical expectations in young children (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015).

Gender as well as the understanding of masculinity and femininity happens through everyday languages, policies, and practices. In numerous societies, gender serves as the primary social identity that guides children in forming preferences and making spontaneous categorizations of individuals (Osgood & Giugni, 2015). While children often adopt traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, many navigate gendered norms in subjective ways. Some children internalize specific characteristics, while others reject gender-normative discourses. Given the increasing portrayal of multifaceted notions of gender within society as well as the addressing of gender inequality and binaries, many children now embrace more fluid concepts of gender (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). Thus, appropriate theoretical frameworks that help researchers to explore gender and childhood are necessary (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

### 3.2.1 Feminist poststructuralism

Common perceptions of gender encompass various theories, including for example biological determinism which argues that gender is biologically determined, or perspective which highlight the environmental influences on gender (Kelly-Ware, 2016). Such theories are often shaped by power dynamics and discourses and thus form how gender as a concept is viewed and understood. Feminist poststructuralism highlights the aspect of power and language, highlighting that gender is being constructed and produced in relation to the mentioned aspects. Kelly-Ware (2016) as well as Bartholomaeus and Senkevics (2015) argue that this theoretical orientation emphasizes the fluidity of gender. Gender and sexualities are therefore not stable and predefined concepts but should rather be viewed as "[…] non-normative, fluid and potentially changeable […]" (Kelly-Ware, 2016, p. 148). Gannon and Davies (2005) add that feminist poststructuralism challenges the gender binary as well as heteronormativity. Gender should not be perceived within rigid categories like the gender binary of male and female, but should rather be viewed as being fluid and changeable and existing on a spectrum. Normative understandings of gender encompass specific standards, norms and portrayals of what masculinity and femininity entail and appear as (Connell, 2005). Normativity refers to a collection of beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, and biases that influence how individuals think, talk, and behave. The feminist poststructuralist perspective acknowledges the possibility of expressing gender in ways that do not conform to societal norms while also challenging traditional binary concepts of male and female, recognizing a spectrum of identities beyond these categories (Kelly-Ware, 2016).

In relation to this research project, it was essential to incorporate a theoretical perspective on gender that highlights the role of discourse, power and agency to

acknowledge the complexity of gender as well as children's voices (and silences) and agency. As stated before, there is already an existing body of work in childhood studies that explores gender and play from a feminist poststructuralist perspective. Within children's play, discourses are made visible in the way in which children engage with objects as well as other individuals, for example adults (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Judith Butler (1990), a key theorist and writer of feminist poststructuralism argues that agency is of importance in the notion of gender as performance (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Butler's (1990) theory on gender being performative is an important aspect of this research's theoretical framework on gender. Thus, I will elaborate on Butler's (1990) perspective as well as its relevance in this research in more detail in the following section.

### 3.2.2 Performativity and gender norms

Judith Butler (1990) is often described as an influential representative of feminist poststructuralism. In childhood studies, her theory of gender performativity has gained credit when researchers examine gender and childhood (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). In Butler's understanding, gender is not inherited or available from birth. It is also argued that gender is not natural, essential or binary. Gender, according to Butler (1990), has a performative aspect in which children, as well as adults, create and perform gender. Gender can be produced and reproduced over time and encompasses multiple forms and identities that are primarily shaped by an individual's actions, behaviors and language (Reddington, 2020; Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). Feminist poststructuralism, gender performativity and social constructionism are closely linked by emphasizing the role of the social and cultural context as well as power dynamics and agency in shaping our understanding of gender and childhood (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Reddington, 2020). By highlighting the importance of the cultural context, Butler (1990) also critiques the distinction and separation between the terms sex and gender. Sex is often perceived to be biological and natural, while gender is understood as a cultural concept and interpretation. In her perspective, sex and gender are intertwined and sex cannot exist without being culturally influenced. This theory therefore argues for the notion of sex and gender as both being culturally constructed (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). Although Butler (1990) does not deny the fact that biological features like hormones or anatomy might affect one's gender and sex, she calls for the notion that a human body cannot exist without being set in a specific cultural context and interpretation (Butler, 1990). Gender, as described with the use of the term performativity, is a process and product of repeated acts that are constituted by language (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). Butler (1990) argues that there would not be any gender without language, because language gives meaning for example to what it means to be male or female (Salih, 2002). This perspective does not suggest that gender is exclusively dictated by language or symbols, but rather that it is formed and shaped by them. It is, however, also important to note that language shapes how individuals talk about gender. Therefore, when conducting research on gender, the role of language must not be overlooked, as the context shapes how gender is discussed and reproduced, which is also of great relevance for this research project (Butler, 1988; Salih, 2002).

Social norms play a pivotal role in shaping the conception of childhood and consequently influence the ways in which children act and express themselves, as highlighted within the theories of social constructionism and gender performativity. As briefly discussed in chapter 2.1.2, social norms are guidelines or expectations set by society to govern behavior within a specific cultural context (Elsen, 2018). In relation to these norms,

values such as acceptability and desirability are of great significance, often shaping an individual's behavior (Kelly-Ware, 2016). Social norms are also significant in the context of gender. There, they appear as gender norms and dictate how gender should be reproduced in specific situations. Although some scholars state that gender norms encompass various aspects of an individual's life, for example appearance, interests or behaviors (Elsen, 2018), Butler (1990) does not present a singular theory or definition of norms. This theoretical perspective rather focuses on examining how norms currently function implicitly in everyday life and shape societies. As noted by Hamilton and Dynes (2023), this theoretical perspective underscores how societal expectations about heteronormativity and the binary division of gender into male and female deeply influence individuals' comprehension and enactment of gender roles. Heteronormativity refers to the belief that heterosexuality is the norm (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). If these gender performances are repeated under heteronormative and binary norms, the idea of gender being biologically determined might arise. Therefore, the existence of two sexes, male and female, appears to be natural in many gendered societies of the world, even though it is a product of verbal and nonverbal language and society (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Reddington, 2020).

As a result of these gender norms, children form gender-related beliefs and concepts early in life and are continually exposed to a set of norms that they are expected to conform to (Reddington, 2020). According to Elsen (2018) as well as Bartholomaeus & Senkevics (2015) children seem to seek cues about gender to better navigate their world. Children make sense and actively produce gender based on their everyday experiences and available options. Children often interpret gender to align with their existing ideas about gender roles that are accessible in their surroundings (Kostas, 2016; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Thus, Reddington (2020) states that the performance of gender in children is very dependent on the individual as well as its environment. The performance of gender is mediated by peers or adults and thus embedded in social power (Karhu, 2017). According to the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, agency is a concept that is related to power. Thus, agency as well as the negotiation of power and relations are therefore of central essence when looking at gender and the reproduction gender norms. Connell (2013) argues that if gender is performed in a normative manner, there should also be the possibility to produce non-normative gender by changing performative actions. Thus, the theory of gender performativity suggests that individuals can disrupt and subvert gender norms by not conforming to societal expectations. In this sense, gender can be deconstructed and reproduced, which can result in a more fluid and diverse concept of gender (Butler, 1990; Karhu, 2017). Especially in regard to childhood, social constructionism highlights that power dynamics and agency are essential aspects in shaping one's understanding of childhood as well as gender and individual's lives in certain contexts (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). Perceiving individuals as actors with agency, suggests that they are granted opportunities in performing gender through the position and (linguistic) practices of an individual. This statement would argue for the notion that the individuals can choose to perform gender either in accordance with societal gender norms and the binaries or not (Reddington, 2020; Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). It is, however, mentioned that individuals are not entirely free to choose how they perform gender, but that there is a societal frame in which they are limited in performing. These societal norms in relation to power also shape how children engage and position themselves in the performance of gender (Kelly-Ware, 2016; Reddington, 2020). Karhu (2017) argues that individuals who diverge from prevailing gender norms are often at risk of being othered and perceived as being

different. Hence, children, as well as other individuals, who do not conform to the norm and therefore do not fall in one of the binaries are often labeled as abnormal. Thus, such individuals and groups, for example transgender, bisexual or genderqueer individuals, are often stigmatized, marginalized or even oppressed (Karhu, 2017; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Reddington, 2020). Children are often guided by adults toward conforming to gender norms which can also be viewed as a manifestation of power. Thus, when children are denied the agency to engage in discussions and negotiations regarding gender norms, it hinders their ability to have different understandings of gender (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Although, through reactions to not corresponding with the norm, the binary view of gender is again reinforced. It is, however, important to note, that Butler (1990) does not critique individuals that fall in the binary but rather wants to shed light on society and its (re-) production of gender. Within her theoretical perspective, she argues that viewing gender as a process and product of performance might disrupt the gender binary and dismantle patriarchal societies with the perception of heterosexuality being the norm. By challenging and flexing gender norms, individuals can reclaim power of their identities and create room for diverse gender expressions that challenge traditional societal expectations (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

Thus, the link between social constructionism and gender performativity lies in their shared emphasis on the constructed and contingent nature of the understanding of the world and cultural contexts individuals live in (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). Therefore, these perspectives were used as for the theoretical framework of this thesis and for exploring how childhood is viewed and how children talk about gender while also acknowledging children's agency and how their understandings are embedded in a specific cultural context and how it is intertwined with societal gender norms (Butler, 1990; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). When researching gender in regard to media, it is also important for this research project to take the aspects of childhood and media into account. Thus, the next sub-chapter will explore theoretical perspectives on children and media.

## 3.3 Children and media

Over the last few decades, a rapid transformation of the media landscape has occurred. This has also increased research on children and media (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). In contemporary times, children's interactions with media cultures are increasingly digitized. Digitization allows for the integration of traditional mass media like books, newspapers, radio, and television with information and communication technologies such as smartphones, computers, and the internet (Drotner, 2009). With the fast spread media, new concerns about children's innocence, safety and health have been raised. These assertions have primarily centered on the concerns of adults regarding media, presupposing that children passively and unquestioningly absorb media images and messages (Drotner, 2009; Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Understanding concerns about children and television call for a historical perspective, considering notions of childhood and responses to new cultural forms of communication in a cultural and historical context (Buckingham, 2009). This reaction of adults to media consumption of children and to newer forms of media has often been defined by the term "media-panic" (Drotner, 2009). Fears about the negative impact of the media on young people have deep historical roots. Over 2000 years ago, Plato in Ancient Greece already urged for a ban of poetry. The 1870s in the United States were shaped by parent's insecurity about dime novels. These concerns persist in contemporary discussions about children's use of media. In more recent controversies, adults argue that televisions, video games and the internet "[…]socialize children into an adult culture of sexist and racist stereotypes,

sexuality, violence and commercialism." (Hadley & Nenga, 2004, p. 515). The internet and smartphones have introduced additional worries due to their dominant presence in children's lives (Drotner, 2009). Discourses expressing concerns about children's digital media use often exhibit gender biases, partly arising from gendered media practices and longstanding gendered traditions (Drotner, 2009).

### 3.3.1 Media studies

Media studies is a research field that examines various forms of media, like print, television, or digital media, and how they shape societies. In the twentieth century, the growing significance of media and increasing scholarly discourse called for a research field, which now draws from various other research fields such as communication studies, sociology or cultural studies (Rippl, 2012). Regardless of its form, media has consistently influenced and transformed the manner in which individuals interact and communicate. Rippl (2012) states that media and its accessibility has also become a fundamental component of many cultures. This challenged existing distinctions between global and local contexts while also shaping cultural and social norms. In recent years, scholars researching children and media like Drotner (2009) and Buckingham (2009) argue that the research field calls for theoretical approaches that view them within a sociocultural context. Due to various perceptions and assumptions of childhood, children are frequently perceived as a unique audience with distinct characteristics and needs in comparison to adults (Buckingham, 2009; Drotner, 2009). Especially in research of television consumption, the term child audience has been shaped by both positive and negative connotations. Contemporary discussions are shaped by a protective approach (Buckingham, 2009). Previous studies on children and media have predominantly utilized content analyses to explore images that are conveyed by media, as well as effect studies to assess how these images influence children. Content analyses and effect studies have been conducted to investigate how exposure to stereotypical and violent media affects children's attitudes, behavior, and emotions. In a majority of these studies, experimental and survey techniques have been used that were rooted in behaviorist or learning theories (Corsaro, 2017). It is essential to note that both content analyses and effect studies usually relied on a deterministic model of socialization, wherein children are seen as passive becomings that engage with content created by and for adults (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Buckingham (2009) argues that the discourse surrounding children and media is deeply intertwined with many other aspects like a cultural context that is often excluded in such discussions. It is emphasized that research on children and media should never be exclusively or primarily focused on media alone (Press, 2011). Simultaneously, questions have been raised by scholars about the idea that media only transmits messages that can be received by the audience. Corsaro (2017) states that despite effects studies and content analyses, there often remains a gap in understanding how audiences and thus children see, appropriate, use, and extend information from the media. Therefore, fueled by cultural studies and the postmodern shift, scholars have recently turned to reception studies to explore how children interpret and comprehend various media messages (Hadley & Nenga, 2004).

The perception and active engagement between the media and its consumers has gained importance in the field of media studies. Influences from the theoretical perspectives of Cultural Studies aim at examining social experiences with the media, with particular interest in the influence of social power like social class, gender, and ethnicity on these experiences (Buckingham, 2009). Similar to childhood studies, Cultural Studies view children as 'active' participants in the meaning-making process, considering them as

competent social actors rather than passive individuals. Buckingham (2009) argues that therefore research should not examine what media does to children, but rather what children do with the media. This perspective challenges the limitations of effects research and aims at understanding media from the user's and consumer's perspectives. Corsaro (2017) argues that this theoretical approach suggests that individuals and thus children actively contribute to cultural production while simultaneously being constrained by existing social structures. In this process, language plays a central role in encoding social and cultural structures (Buckingham, 2009; Corsaro, 2017). Childhood culture encompasses various representations of children's beliefs, concerns and values, including children's media. Although information from these sources is primarily mediated by adults in cultural routines, children swiftly appropriate, use, and transform symbolic culture as they engage in peer culture. Despite playing an active role in the production of cultural routines with adults, children generally hold subordinate positions due to power dynamics between adults and children (Corsaro, 2017). Such aspects like power and social norms that approaches from cultural studies focus on, can be linked with aspects I have discussed in previous sub-chapters on gender performativity as well as social constructionism. Reception studies or research on media interpretation are examples of methodologies used in media studies that prioritize aspects like power dynamics or agency (Rippl, 2012). Thus, the combination of a cultural studies approach and reception studies aims at gaining a deeper understanding of children as users or consumers of media and their experiences (Buckingham, 2009).

### 3.3.2 Feminist and queer audience studies

As argued by scholars like Buckingham (2009), discourses about media should not focus on the media alone but should rather explore it in relation to many aspects of an individual, its environment and key aspects like gender, ethnicity, class or sexuality (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Thus, feminist media studies and gender media studies have emerged as central pillars of media and communication research. Mendes and Carter (2008) contend that while these two disciplines share a close connection, they diverge in minor aspects like interests or research methodologies. On one hand, feminist media studies revolve around the representation of gender and sexuality (Press, 2011). On the other hand, understanding audience interpretations of these representations has become central to feminist and gender studies in the media (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Thus, media studies have delved into analyzing media narratives alongside investigating how these messages are received and interpreted, with a subsequent focus on their impact and cultural significance on society (Press, 2011). One of the first feminist audience studies was conducted by Herta Herzog in 1941, focusing on female listeners of daytime radio soap operas while exploring the role of media in their daily lives. While earlier feminist research predominantly centered on women, the evolution of the field resulted in including queer communities, thus setting the stage for the development of queer audience research (Cavalcantea et al., 2017). Recent studies also focus on men and male gender roles, examining how understanding of portrayals in the media shape various forms of masculinity (Mendes & Carter, 2008). This theoretical perspective can be linked with cultural studies, feminist poststructuralism and social constructionism due to the research field's recognition of complex power structures, language and social contexts (Cavalcantea et al., 2017; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Press, 2011). Hence, incorporating feminist audience study with the above mentioned approaches can effectively establish a cohesive theoretical framework for this research project.

In reception and audience studies, media encompasses multiple messages with multiple meanings. Consumer and user, therefore, are active actors that interpret and ascribe meaning to media messages (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). According to Livingstone and Das (2013), interpretation encompasses the process through which individuals derive meaning from their experiences. This sense-making is inherently contextual and often varies based on the specific context in which it occurs, often allowing space for multiple interpretations (Livingstone & Das, 2013). However, Mendes and Carter (2008) also note that interpretations are often embedded in and constrained by the contexts and power dynamics within which messages are situated (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Thus, interpreting can be described as producing and reproducing meaning across various levels. In alliance with gender performativity, it can be highlighted that gender and its meaning within a media context is not preexisting but rather actively produced (Mendes & Carter, 2008). The intertwined concepts of interpretation and reception are often explored within the framework of "reception studies" (Livingstone & Das, 2013). Within the field of childhood studies, reception studies has been essential in examining how children comprehend and interpret media. While studies with teenagers often center their use of media in relation to the construction of meaning including concepts of gender or identity; studies with younger children rather concentrate on how they understand media content (Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Children within this framework are viewed as actors with agency of their own that are able to form and articulate their own opinions and interpretations. By focusing on children's meaning-making, reception analysis aligns with interpretive models of socialization, emphasizing the collective nature of children's information intake and their contribution to cultural reproduction and change (Corsaro, 2017; Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Although the number of research on children's reception of media is increasing, it is important to note that discussions on children and digital media engage with a complex and ever-changing set of relationships. It takes researchers, however, one step closer in listening to children's voices while trying to understand these phenomena from the children's perspectives (Drotner, 2009).

## 3.4 Chapter summary

This chapter explored the theoretical framework utilized in this thesis. Perspectives within the research fields of childhood studies, gender studies and media studies have shaped this research project. The field of childhood studies acknowledges children as active social actors engaged in actively sharing and shaping knowledge about childhood. Social constructionism highlights the significance of examining children's experiences in a cultural and historical context and regarding power and discourse. Children's agency, particularly in relation to gender, has been emphasized. Gender and childhood has been explored through a feminist-poststructuralist lens and through Butler's view on gender performativity. This theoretical framework emphasizes the idea that gender is produced in relation to power, discourse and language and a specific context. Thus, this view highlights gender's fluid and potentially changeable nature. Finally, the chapter delved into theoretical considerations on children and media. Approaches from cultural studies alongside feminist and queer audience studies have been presented to explore children's interpretation and sense-making of media and gender. It is crucial to highlight that the fields presented and used for this thesis overlap, especially in views on power, language, gender, social context and children's agency. Thus, the presented fields contribute to a fitting theoretical framework for exploring children's interpretations of animated characters in relation to gender.

# 4 Methodology

This chapter examines the methodological choices made and steps taken for this research project. First, I will discuss the qualitative methodological approach, followed by the procedure of sampling, gaining access to the field and recruitment of 11 participants between the ages of 10-13 years. In this segment, I will go into more detail of how I got access to the participants and the research site as well as which procedures had to be done beforehand, like applying for ethical approval, sending out information letters and getting in contact with gatekeepers. Then, the process of data collection including the conducted participatory methods (visual stimuli interview, ranking and drawing) will be discussed. Even though this research includes participatory tools, as stated before, it is important to note, that this study is not designed as a fully participatory research project. Children's participation was included while generating and collecting data, but not other steps like the process of initially designing the study or when analyzing the data. Following the segment that explores the methods and participatory tools used in this research, ethical considerations including voluntary participation as well as my role as a researcher and the interpretation of data will be discussed. Furthermore, I will provide an outlook on the analysis and interpretation of the generated data, delving into the structured process of transcribing the interviews and thematic analysis as an analytical tool for interpreting the data.

## 4.1 Methodological approach

According to scholars like Hammersley (2017) and James (2007) the new paradigm of childhood studies emerged in response to the historical marginalization of children and childhood in an adult-based society. Hence, the perception of children being actors that should be studied in their own right developed (Hammersley, 2017). Throughout previous decades and centuries, children have often been seen as objects which especially has been visible in research with children. In regard to the shift in childhood studies, there's a perception of children as active participants within their social and situational contexts shaping and constructing childhood through actions and interactions with their surroundings and agents (Prout, 2011; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Children are also viewed as human beings which emphasizes many aspects in children's lives including their needs and rights (Hammersley, 2017; Prout, 2011). Thus, children should also have the right to participate which also encompasses the right to being properly researched (Beazley et al., 2009; Prout, 2011). Beazley et al. (2009) state following about children and research:

> Children have the right as human beings to be involved in decisions made about them. [...] In research, children's participation ideally involves them in the whole research process, but at very least it means that their opinions and experiences are explored alongside those of adults, especially in research on topics that concern them [...]. (Beazley et al., 2009, p. 1.31)

Discussions on the role and position of children within research are dynamic. While some statements argue that research about children should therefore include and center children, newer discussions also call for decentering the child (Spyrou, 2016). Centering the child, however, does not necessarily mean leaving adults out but rather focusing on

children, giving them possibilities and space to speak and act as well as listening to their voices (Beazley et al., 2009; Prout, 2011).

In feminist and queer media studies, scholars have underscored the significance of appropriate methodologies for investigating gender and media. Research methodologies need to adjust to the dynamic challenges and responsibilities posed by factors like the widespread presence of media, its global reach, and the interactive nature of audiences. However, it's crucial not to neglect the influence of power dynamics while doing so (Cavalcantea et al., 2017; Livingstone & Das, 2013; Mendes & Carter, 2008). Therefore, qualitative research methods have gained significance when exploring children, gender, and media. Cavalcantea et al. (2017) also emphasize the use of multiple methods that examine the dynamic interactions among systems of power, including various social and individual contexts. Interviews and focus groups are methodological approaches that are often used in such research designs (Mendes & Carter, 2008; Tobin, 2000). Concurrently, some researchers have embraced a more 'ethnographic' approach, primarily relying on observation to study children's media use within their worlds and environments (Buckingham, 2009).

The perspectives and methodological considerations in the fields of childhood studies, gender studies and media studies were crucial for me as a researcher when designing and planning this research. The engagement with the thesis topic and the resulting research questions led to the choice of conducting qualitative research. Qualitative research aims to explore and understand social phenomena as well as individual's experiences and perspectives (Mason, 2002). For gathering data, various non-numerical forms such as text, images or observations are used. These types of detailed and rich generated data help the research in gaining insight in a number of social research topics (Flick, 2013). The broader context of the research influences the research design and furthermore links the research to the selection of methods used in a research project (Mason, 2002). Within the context of my chosen research field, qualitative research with its features is best suited for exploring phenomena related to children, gender and media. While engaging with various topics and course works during my studies, the concept of participatory research with children struck my interests. In participatory research, the inclusion of participants in many steps of the research process is essential for the participants' role in the research (Grant, 2017; Abebe, 2009). In some research designs, like this one, the data collection can be achieved by the use of participatory methods. These methods include various techniques that can be adapted and combined with each other (Grant, 2017; Gallagher 2008).

For this research, it was essential for me to create a research design which aligns with the multidisciplinary theoretical framework. Thus, considering central aspects of childhood, gender and media studies was necessary. The methodological approach for this research project has considered significant aspects such as power structures, social and cultural context, language, and meaning. This aspect was particularly pertinent in studies involving children, prompting the adoption of a qualitative research methodology. Since my research delved into children's interpretations of gender and animated characters, it was most productive for exploring the topic of study and for answering the research questions to select an approach that facilitated the exploration and discussion of children's perspectives. Since I did not have capacities to conduct a full participatory research project, three specific participatory methods were selected and integrated for the data generation: the visual stimuli interview, ranking, and drawing. Why I chose these methods and how these methods fit the research design, will be elaborated on in

detail in a later section of this chapter. This research design was considered suitable for investigating social phenomena in childhood, taking into account ethics and recognizing children's voices, their comprehension of the mentioned phenomena, and their involvement in research.

## 4.2 Engaging in the field work process

Finding participants for a research process is an important step when planning and conducting projects. This step can be summed up with the term sampling (Rapley, 2013; Mason, 2002). As Mason (2002) states, sampling and selecting possible participants are "[...] principles and procedures used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant data sources [...] from which you will generate data using your chosen methods" (Mason, 2002, p. 120). Depending on the research topic and type, specific strategies for sampling can be used (Rapley, 2013; Mason, 2002). As I have established in the previous chapter, I have designed this research to be a qualitative study. Due to the aim of qualitative studies of exploring social phenomena in depth, the number of participants is rather smaller than in quantitative research and thus should be carefully considered. The amount of participants can vary depending on the research topic, but should not be excessively large, as this can pose challenges in analyzing the data (Brennen, 2021). Hence, Brinkmann & Kvale (2015) suggest 5-15 participants for qualitative research. But before randomly recruiting children for my research project, I first had to choose the participants' criteria fitting to this research and the research questions (Rapley, 2013). Beforehand, I delved into previously conducted research in this field. Many of these studies, such as Birner (2016), Hamilton and Dynes (2023), and Kostas (2016), interviewed children aged 7-11 years. To build upon existing research and utilize this knowledge base as a foundation, I first decided to recruit children aged 8-13 years for my study. Initially, the wider age range was justified based on Bartholomaeus and Senkevics' (2015) statement that children's understanding of gender is intertwined with age. Their research underscores that children begin engaging with gender early on, emphasizing the importance of exploring children's gender perception across various ages. Hence, it was also important for the context of this research to include children of all genders to explore this phenomenon through various perspectives and narratives (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015). In order for children to participate in this research, it was enough that they had some form of experience with animation. This was not a criteria I checked with the participants and parents directly, but which rather came naturally due to the participants' interest and voluntary participation. Apart from age and the existing interest in animated characters, there were no further requirements for the participants.

After clearly defining my targeted age group as well as planning my research project, I then filed an application for ethical clearance with the Sikt, the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, which included all the important information of my research like methods used, data protection as well as letters of information. Due to my research topic not including any highly sensitive information like health or religion of the participants, there were no other applications necessary. Upon approval of my application, I proceeded with the project and commenced participant recruitment. For recruiting participants, I wanted to approach children individually through sending out information about my research project. However, I was unsure if I would be able to reach the number of participants I needed and wanted for my research project. Hence, I considered reaching out to schools as a contingency plan. However, as I managed to establish connections with both children and adults in my vicinity, this alternative

became less pertinent. In the recruiting process, the participants were then chosen by the strategy of purposive sampling in combination with volunteer sampling. Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants who possess knowledge about the specific phenomenon of interest, while volunteer sampling focuses on the voluntary participation in the research project (Gill, 2020). At first, information letters were sent out to gatekeepers and potential participants were given information about my project. However most of the gatekeepers and participants got to know about my research through talking and connecting with mutual acquaintances. The mutual person then gave my information and contact to the gatekeepers of the participants. The children knew the mutual person who knew me, which might have made the children feel more comfortable because I was not a complete stranger but rather a person their acquaintance knew. The gatekeepers, in most cases the participant's parents, were the first persons I got in contact with. My information was given to the gatekeepers, who then reached out to me. This proved to be an effective strategy, as it resulted in the gatekeepers reaching out to me rather than the other way around, thus resulting in only those interested in participating contacting me. This led to a small obstacle or uncertainty regarding my research plan, as almost all interested children were aged 10-13 years. Consequently, I considered narrowing down the age range of the participants. However, Mcnamee and Seymour (2012, p. 166) point out that much research is conducted with children aged 10-12 years, which could lead to a "sociology of 10-12 year olds." In order to avoid reinforcing this and to give voices to children in other age groups, I was initially unsure whether I should make this restriction. In the end, I decided to do so. Although this could contribute to the reinforcement of this age group, I can also justify the decision by the fact that many participating children were of this age, rather than being a deliberate recruitment targeting this age group out of necessity. Additionally, children of this age may find it easier to talk about gender than younger children, although this does not mean that younger children are less competent (Birner, 2016). In total 11 children aged 10 – 13 years old were recruited for participating in this research project and being part of an interview about animated characters.

This study was carried out in Vienna, the capital city of Austria. Vienna spans an area of 415 square kilometers, and as of 2023, it was home to 1.9 million residents (Stadt Wien, 2024). Due to Vienna's area and number of inhabitants, it is crucial to highlight the city's diversity in both landscapes and people. 8 out of the 11 children participating lived in Vienna's western and outer districts, close to the city's borders. The other three children, however, lived not in Vienna's but in its suburbs, still close to where the other children were living. As stated before, the interviews have been conducted at the children's homes. The neighborhoods where the children lived were quiet ones, characterized by numerous single-family houses, middle class, green spaces, and forests. It's noteworthy because many people might not consider this aspect when discussing Vienna as a city with millions of inhabitants. Due to the children's proximity to each other, some of the participants knew each other either through growing up together, going to the same school or participating in the same community. Some children even knew that their acquaintances and friends were taking part in this research due to them talking with each other about the research project. The children in this study all attended school. The two younger ones Hannah and Daniel, aged 10, were in the 4th grade of elementary school. The others were in the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd grade of secondary school (5th/6th/7th grade). Despite potential similarities among some children in terms of their cultural and geographical context, it remains essential to acknowledge that each child possesses their own unique individual context when interpreting animated characters. This individual

context encompasses a range of factors such as personal experiences, gender or age, which shape how children make meaning of the characters they encounter (Livingstone & Das, 2013).

## 4.3 (Participatory) methods

Research that involves its participants in the research process has gained significant growth in research with children over the last few decades. Also known under the term participatory research, this type of research aims at including participants in (almost) every step of the research process, for example generation or analysis of data (Grant, 2017; Beazley, 2006). The acknowledgment of children's agency and the emphasis of them being human-beings underscores children's competence to share their perspectives and exert their participation in research (Beazley, 2006; Grant, 2017; Horgan, 2016). Holland et al. (2010) view participatory research on a spectrum, including various forms and manifestations. Participatory research can range from engaging children in the whole research process to only involving them in child-centered research methods like play in the process of generating data. Even though participatory methods sometimes are perceived to have epistemological as well as ethical advantages over traditional methods, reflections need to be done when implementing such methods in research concerning ethics like appropriateness, children's voices and the concept of power (Grant, 2017; Spyrou, 2011). Even though children are often the main focus of participatory research, it is essential to recognize the research as a relational process involving adults and therefore generational and power differentials. According to Gallagher (2008) it is also crucial to note that hands-on activities and methods do not automatically equal the concept of participation. As a researcher, it is important for me to consider this statement while designing my own research project. Although I have included participatory tools, which will be described in more detail in the next section, it is also essential for me to not equate this automatically with children's active participation in the research. Ensuring that children have the opportunity to participate and contribute to this project needed to be clearly argued in the research design, which I will now discuss further.

### 4.3.1 Overview of the research design

This research project has been designed in order to give the participants the possibility to shape the research through their participation and expertise. For the process of fieldwork, a meeting was arranged with each participant. Thus, there were 11 meetings in total. This was the only time that I met the participants in person and generated data. An individual visual stimuli interview was the base and starting point of each meeting for this research project. In addition to the interview, participatory tools – drawing and ranking - have been included in our conversations. These methods were chosen in regard to key concepts of the theoretical framework as well as in accordance with the posed research questions. With each child participant, I initiated the research process with the interview which gave me and the participant an opportunity to get to know each other better. Throughout this activity, I observed the children becoming more at ease in conversing with me, which I considered valuable in preparation for the ranking and drawing activity. During the interview and the other two activities, I posed questions outlined in the interview guide (see appendix 6), while also incorporating follow-up discussions after both activities. Because of individual interpretations of gender in an animated character, the children were asked to choose animated characters they want to talk about in an interview. Before the interview, the children were asked to choose

animated characters they like and animated characters they dislike. Therefore, it was important that both the children and their parents received information in advance about the research project, as they should already have their characters ready for the interview. Due to limited monetary and temporal resources I was not able to design this project as a fully participatory research where children are included in every step of the research process. I therefore came to the conclusion to use participatory tools while generating data as well as giving children the opportunity to explore a topic of their own interest by giving them room and freedom for choosing animated characters they want to examine and explore.

### 4.3.2 Individual visual stimuli interviews

As this research project focuses on understanding perceptions of a phenomenon, it was most appropriate to investigate this through verbal expressions. Hence, individual semi-structured interviews have been conducted for generating and collecting data. Interviews typically involve verbal discussions on specific topics and can be conducted individually or in group settings. Individual interviews allow researchers to gain insights into the thoughts of a single child, while focus groups provide an opportunity to observe group dynamics and interactions among children (Punch & Graham, 2017). Due to the fact that a personal understanding of a character and gender are the main focus of this research project, I decided to conduct the interviews individually. This format provided the participating children with time and space to discuss their preferences, interpretations and choices, such as why they chose specific characters or qualities. It also allowed me as a researcher to explore the topic, statements and interpretations in-depth, giving me the opportunity to pose follow up questions or ask the children to elaborate a statement in more detail.

As it is common practice in qualitative research to work semi-structured, I also established an interview guide that led the participants and me as a researcher through our interview. Semi-structured interviews tend to have a more informal approach compared to structured interviews, due to being more spontaneous and flexible, giving the interviewer the possibility to change the order of questions or pose follow-up questions while also having a set of questions and topics prepared. An interview guide comprises a set of predetermined questions and topics that provide structure to the interview. The interview guide can vary in format, including both overarching themes and specific, detailed questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Even though the interview guide provides predefined questions, they remain open to adjustments based on the responses and perspectives of the participants and even open up for opportunities to go into more in-depth conversations (Knott et al., 2022). At the beginning of our interview there was a short introduction, where the participant and I introduced each other. While getting to know the participants, I tried to establish a comfortable and friendly atmosphere. In many cases, I posed ice breaker questions or talked with the children about something unrelated to the research topic. In such situations, I mentioned at the beginning that the introduction and the conversations are not included in the data collection. After the introduction, I continued by giving information of our agenda as well as more general information of the research and the interview, like ethics, asking for consent or recordings. All interviews were recorded in accordance with the participants consent. For the first few interviews, I used a recording device. This seemed to be a bit confusing for the children due to them not being familiar with such a device. The later interviews were securely and in accordance with the ethical considerations recorded on a phone using the "Nettskjema Dictaphone App". The children seemed to be more comfortable with this

device due to them being familiar with phones. At the beginning, the participants seemed to be a bit insecure due to them knowing that they are being recorded. I did, however, emphasize that no one will hear the recording except for me. After a few minutes, the excitement and tension was gone, and a more natural conversation was possible. The first section was followed by the participants' presentation and descriptions of their animated characters, including visual descriptions as well as where they know their character from or what they like and dislike about them. Especially when the children introduced their character to me, pictures which were used as visual stimuli were helpful.

In media studies, particularly in feminist and queer audience studies, the media and the content plays a crucial role in exploring the audience's interpretation of media. Therefore, media experiences, especially in terms of interpretation and reception, are frequently researched in direct correlation with the medium itself (Cavalcante et al., 2017). Thus, incorporating visual elements, such as pictures, proved to be a crucial aspect of the interviews conducted for this study. The participants were asked to choose animated characters they like and characters they disliked, by sending out information letters as well as by giving information to their gatekeepers. At first, I asked them to bring photos of their characters to the interview. It then, however, turned out to be more practical to look up pictures of the characters on a phone or other electronic device. When using these devices, the children were in charge and were able to select the pictures they liked best. These characters and pictures then provided a starting point for the interview. The pictures, on one hand, help me as a researcher to get a grasp of what characters the children chose, because I did not know which characters the children selected before our actual meeting. On the other hand, pictures can also serve as sensory stimuli, aiding participants in recalling memories and encouraging their engagement in discussions (Grant, 2017). The use of visual data during interviews can help level the power dynamics between researchers and participants. It shifts the dynamic by making the participant the expert of the data and interview (Punch & Graham, 2017). The use of visual materials in interviews can yield different information compared to traditional interviews. It can provide insights not only about the pictures themselves but also about various aspects of the participants' lives connected to the visual data presented. It is however important to consider that inappropriate visual data which is not related to the research topic might disrupt the interview process (Pauwels, 2015). In regard to this research project, the pictures proved to be adding to the process of generating data. While talking about their characters, the pictures were used as an anchor but also encouraged the children to talk in more detail about their character, for example by providing a backstory of the situation in the picture. There was no inappropriate visual data or data that distracted from the interview.

Characters, understanding of gender and gender norms were topics that were discussed next. This section aimed at collecting information about the perception of the characters and their gender and the connection with gender norms in society. It included more general questions about gender (What is your understanding of the word gender or What do you think is typical for a woman/girl or for a man/boy?) as well as questions about gender and their chosen characters (How would you interpret your character's gender? Or Are your characters typical for a gender?). Getting more insight into characteristics and the children's understanding of gender was first explored by talking about characteristics in their characters in general, followed by them being discussed in terms of gender. In this section, the activity of ranking was conducted which was followed up by a discussion about their chosen characteristics and their connection to gender. The final section examined the ideal character of the children, which incorporated the activity

of drawing. The children were asked to draw their ideal character. The drawings were then discussed and questions were asked like why would you consider this to be your ideal animated character?. The interview guide therefore encompassed both more general questions as well as detailed questions. The majority of posed questions were open questions, making space for the children to speak as well as giving room to their opinions and interpretations.

Before the interviews were conducted with the participants, I conducted two pilot interviews: one with an adult and one with a child within the specified age range. These interviews were both interesting and provided valuable insights. They assisted me in refining the research design and planning process. Additionally, they helped me prepare for the actual interviews and become familiar with the role of the researcher and the questions that are part of the interview guide. Then, the interviews with the participants were conducted. They were conducted at the children's homes. Meeting the parents and children was a pleasant and intriguing experience, as everyone was friendly and open. I appreciated the trust extended to me, even by children and gatekeepers I have not previously met. To both the participants and me, space was given for and during our interviews. Some interviews took place in the children's rooms, while others were conducted in common spaces such as living rooms. The parents remained nearby, often in adjacent rooms, yet they still respected our privacy and allowed us space to engage comfortably. This allowed us to converse privately. Most of the children I interviewed were talkative, displaying enthusiasm and passion for the topic and their chosen characters. They shared many interesting insights that proved to be valuable for the analysis and interpretation. However, upon reflection, I realized there were points I could have delved deeper into or followed up with additional questions, particularly regarding topics that were comprehensive to me as an insider, such as current debates in Austria, but may not have been clear to outsiders. To mitigate this, I found that participatory tools like ranking and drawing provided opportunities for the children to pause, reflect, and take breaks from speaking, aiding in the overall conversation flow.

### 4.3.3 Ranking

Ranking is a mixed-method approach, combining aspects of qualitative and qualitative elements, often categorized within diagram techniques. This method revolves around the prioritization and comparison of various issues and phenomena, offering insights into what aspects hold significance in the lives of participants (Grant, 2017). I have used the method of ranking to explore children's views on characteristics in animated characters. I therefore asked the participants to come up with five characteristics of one of their animated characters, which they then had to bring into an order, from best to worst. There were no limitations on which characteristics the participants were able to choose. The children were also given the freedom to choose how they would complete and conduct this activity. According to Ager and Sparling (2013), the method of ranking can take on diverse forms, such as pyramids, lines, or numerical scales, and can be conducted individually or in group settings. It also allows participants the flexibility to suggest themes they wish to rank. Most of the participants used paper and pencils for written or drawn responses. Numerical scales as well as pyramids were the most common visual representation forms used by the participants in this activity. Ranking as a participatory method doesn't have to rely solely on written responses with pen and paper; it can involve the use of various physical materials and objects that require arrangement (Ager & Sparling, 2013). This method also incorporates both tactile and verbal activities (Grant, 2017). Therefore, the ranking activity was never carried out in

isolation in this research project. Before, during and after conducting this task, I engaged in dialogues with the participants regarding the choices of characteristics of their rankings. The dialogues and discussions were also part of the interview and the recordings. First, I gave instructions to the participants, explaining the task while answering their posed questions. In the instruction, I stated that I would like them to rank 5 characteristics in a character from best to worst. According to researchers like Hamilton and Dynes (2023), as well as Birner (2016) and Baltes-Löhr (2018) the term characteristics in animated characters encompasses various aspects, ranging for example from physical appearance to personality traits to behavior. Especially in regard to gender, characteristics can take on and encompass various forms like gender-specific traits like physical characteristics like hormones, psychological dimensions like self-perception, or gender norms created by society as well as role behavior or certain attributions intertwined with these societal ideas and expectations (Baltes-Löhr, 2018). As a researcher, I therefore purposely chose the term "characteristics" when talking with the children to not only gain an insight on how characteristics are perceived by children but also how they talk about it in regard to their chosen characters and gender.

The importance of the children's definition and understanding of the term "characteristics", was crucial for the activity of ranking. Even though some children seemed to implicitly understand and use the term characteristics on different levels and in different contexts by themselves, some children also seemed to have been confused when I asked them to talk about characteristics due to the broad definition of the term and being open to interpretation. Some participants, like Max and Paul, seemed to be unsure which types of characteristics I wanted to talk with them about. Other participants, however, were unsure how to visualize their ordered characteristics. These participants then asked me as a researcher how and in what way they should do it. Although I responded to their questions by emphasizing that the decision was theirs, I also made it clear that there were no right or wrong answers, and that their opinions and choices would be part of the research without being judged or criticized. Overall, this activity seemed to be more difficult for the participants than the drawing activity due to its complex and open instructions in regard to the research interest. The time the children needed for this task also varied, ranging from 5 minutes to 30 minutes. By engaging in the ranking task, children can focus on the activity itself without the constant need to interact with the researcher, potentially impacting the power dynamics within the research process due to also letting their silence be heard (Grant, 2017). Children's silence or the absence of voice should be acknowledged by researchers and thus should not be interpreted as a lack of voice (Spyrou, 2016). Although I initially planned not to speak with the children while they were writing or drawing so they could focus on the task, many conversations naturally arose, which later proved significant for analysis. However, with all children, after they had written down their ranked characteristics, I began to discuss their choices with them in more detail and depth. The ranked objects or the written rankings served as visual stimuli during our discussions. While we first talked about the characteristics in general, we then continued to discuss them in terms of gender, for example if certain traits are specific to one gender. While talking about gender, the discussion was also often still connected to their animated characters of choice as well as their role in a certain movie, show or universe. The activity of ranking offers a way of exploring the perceptions and understanding of children about the world around them (Ager & Sparling, 2013, Grant, 2017). Despite being able to gain insight into what children perceive as relevant and good and bad characteristics, I was only able to explore a limited number of important aspects in animated characters, their

characteristics and gender by ranking alone. I was, however, able to explore children's interpretation more deeply by combining this method with interviews and drawing. The latter will be discussed in the next section in more detail.

### 4.3.4 Drawing

Utilizing drawing as a visual method provides children with an opportunity to express themselves nonverbally, particularly when addressing subjects that may be challenging to articulate verbally (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). In the context of this research, drawings were employed to explore the concepts of ideal characters. Participants were invited to sketch their "ideal" version of an animated character. Afterwards, the drawings were discussed, and themes like what it means to be the ideal character, characteristics, and gender were explored. The inclusion of drawing was argued by the fact that drawing is historically associated with animation (Wells, 1998). Drawing therefore allows children to delve deeper into this topic and offers them the opportunity to create their own characters. Subsequently, I engaged in conversations with the children about their drawings to gain a deeper comprehension of both the children's depictions and their notions of an ideal character (Punch, 2002). Due to the statement that children's drawings are influenced by their social, cultural, and historical context as well as power imbalances, it is essential for the researcher to combine these methods with other techniques like interviews. This is a critical step in analyzing and interpreting these drawings. Researchers should avoid imposing their interpretations on the children's drawings and instead engage with the children in conversations about their drawings, while listening to their descriptions which might give insight into the children's perspectives (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019).

Researchers commonly note that children often view drawing as an enjoyable and creative activity (Punch, 2002). Most of the children seemed to perceive this activity as fun. They spent a lot of time drawing and even creating universes like stories or worlds about their characters and drawings. However, it's essential to recognize that while drawing might be enjoyable for some children, others may find it uncomfortable or a demanding challenge. Interest and drawing ability can influence a child's willingness to participate in such activities. Therefore, it is crucial to reassure children that their drawings will not be judged based on their appearance (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). Some children in this research at first seemed to be insecure about their drawing skills. I then assured them that their drawings would not be judged. However, I fully respected the decision of three participants who chose not to draw. They then however proposed to explain their character to me in more detail or drew a stick figure while explaining the backstory later on. I have decided not to insert the drawings visually as images in this thesis. However, the conversations that arose from them were taken into account during the interpretation of the data. Although the participants' drawings were relevant, I found the discussions about them even more relevant and suitable for the analysis of the data in this research project. Situations like this call for reflections also in regard to ethical considerations which will be explored in the following section.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

Conducting any type of research calls for careful considerations; no matter the topic of the research or research environment. Thoughts and considerations that encompass the research itself, the participants, the researchers, and many other aspects should be taken into account in any research. These considerations can be summarized under the term ethical considerations. According to Graham et al. (2015), ethical considerations

can be described as a set of concerns and issues concerning many aspects and circumstances of a research and the rights of the participants. Abebe and Bessell (2014) add that these considerations have evolved over time, and, nowadays, play a relevant role at every step in the research process. Scholars argue that, especially in research involving children, due to them often being a marginalized group and influenced by power imbalances between children and adults, ethical considerations are of crucial importance. Some considerations might be considered to be more general and are also necessary to be incorporated in research with adults, for example, anonymity or the well-being of participants. There are however also aspects that deserve even more attention in research with children as they are considered to be vulnerable according to guidelines, for example, power imbalances between the researcher and the children as participants or ethics of representation (Beazley et al., 2009; Abebe & Bessell, 2014).

Before planning and conducting research, I had to familiarize myself with ethical guidelines that were relevant and required for writing this paper. This included regulations such as adhering to and working according to the ethical guidelines of NTNU University and applying for ethical clearance from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research also called Sikt. Additionally, I had to consider potential ethical considerations in the planning process, such as the safety of participants and their data. Engaging with these guidelines allowed me to acquire knowledge about handling ethical dilemmas. During my fieldwork, I encountered small situations, such as how to act as a researcher in certain conversations during interviews with the children. However, without appearing insensitive or unreflective, I would assert that there were no significant ethical dilemmas in my research project that posed a threat to or compromised the safety of the children. Nevertheless, it was important to address potential situations and to consider specific aspects of the research project, as well as my role in it, before and after data collection.

### 4.4.1 Role and position of the researcher

Before conducting research, it is significant for the researcher to plan out a research design. This also includes the position and role of the researcher within the research process (Abebe, 2009). Especially when engaging with children in the field, the role of the researcher might have an influence on the participants and their actions and behavior during the research. It is argued that there is a power imbalance between the researcher and the participants, which I will elaborate on in more detail in a later subchapter. Within the research in childhood studies various ideas and concepts of the researcher's role and position have emerged, which are often intended to decrease the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants. Before conducting the fieldwork and interacting with the children, I got acquainted with some of the roles researchers have taken on in previous research. One example of roles taken on by researchers in previous studies were the "a-typical" role where the researchers embraced the persona of an "incompetent adult" who is comfortable with being directed by children (Corsaro, 1996). The aim of such roles and techniques is to reduce the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the child participant (Abebe, 2009; Corsaro, 1996). As I got familiar with various roles, I knew that I wanted the participants to feel comfortable around me as a researcher while also maintaining a natural and personal role in which I did not have to change my personality too much. I therefore got a liking for the "friendly role", as described by Abebe (2009) of a way to minimize the power of the researcher by establishing a trusting relationship based on friendship with the participants. Treating children with respect while also showing positive emotions towards them are key aspects

of this researcher role. The role as a researcher I assumed was especially crucial in my case, as I only had one opportunity to meet my participants during the interview session and wanted to ensure their comfort. Unlike in ethnographic engagements, I did not have the time to establish a deeper bond with the participants. My primary objective was therefore to gain valuable insights by fostering trust with the children and minimizing any sense of authority over them, while also fostering a safe and comfortable atmosphere in which we could talk. I strived to maintain this role throughout the research process, which the children seemed to take on well. They trusted me and we were able to communicate openly. While participatory research often entails the researcher adopting an assisting role and guiding children through various steps, it's important to acknowledge that the majority of this project was planned and organized by me as the adult researcher. However, when conducting the interviews, the children were able to participate and shape some aspects of the interview.

My goal of taking on the "friendly role" as a researcher, was that the participants as well as gatekeepers felt that they could trust me and are genuinely motivated to participate in the research. From my perspective, I believe that I was able to maintain my role and succeed in reaching my goal. Listening to children's voices, while acknowledging their agency and thus minimizing power imbalances were also important when designing this research project. Even though it is crucial to note that the researcher's role can decrease the power imbalance when engaging with the children; other imbalances might arise in other aspects of the research e.g. analysis of data (Spyrou, 2011; Christensen, 2004).

## 4.4.2 Voluntary participation, consent and gatekeepers

As stated in an earlier chapter, historically, much of the research on children has been conducted on them rather than with them (Hammersley, 2017). The past attitudes and approach towards children raise questions about whether they participated in research voluntarily. As children are viewed as agents, their own opinions and actions come to the forefront. They should have the same rights as adults to participate in research. However, this should happen on a voluntary basis and through informed consent. Voluntary participation also includes the right and the possibility to withdraw from the research whenever the participants wish, without having to provide a reason to the researcher (Beazley et al., 2009).

The fundamental ethical consideration about informed consent is evermore important in research with children due to their standing in society and the related power imbalance between children and adults (Punch, 2002; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). Informed consent aims at providing the participants with all the necessary and essential information on the research which they need to understand in the process of agreeing to participate in the research. Informed consent should include information about the research process, for example about the safety of the participants and what happens with their data afterwards. It is crucial that the information is formulated in a way that the participants can understand it. For children this might mean to phrase the consent in an easier language in using less legal terms and rephrasing it slightly without losing or changing the meaning (Beazley et al., 2009). In research with children it is also necessary for gatekeepers for example the parents or legal guardians of the children to consent. Even though the gatekeeper's consent is also crucial for being able to conduct the field work with the participants, it is, however, not entirely their say about the children participating or not. Even if the gatekeepers consent, this alone is not enough - the children should consent too. The children's voluntary participation and informed

consent should take precedence and should not be influenced or pressured by their gatekeepers.

Before the interviews began, it was crucial to ensure that both the parents and the children had a comprehensive understanding of the research project and were participating voluntarily. This was achieved through clear and detailed explanation of the research design and ethics, both on-site during the interviews and beforehand through provided information. Participants and gatekeepers were informed beforehand by sending out information letters, as well as the gatekeepers contacting me over phone after reading the letter. On-site, before the interview, we discussed the research design and ethics together, both parents and children. Both the parents and the children had the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns before signing a form documenting their consent to participate. Before the interview started, the children and parents had time to read the letter and information again. Then, if they wanted to participate, they had to sign a form agreeing that they had received information from me about the research. Additionally, both the child and the gatekeeper had to confirm their willingness to participate. Since all children were under 16, the gatekeeper also had to sign the consent form. When I was alone with the child, I explained again what exactly we would be doing during the interview as well as other aspects concerning ethics like recording or not judging the child's opinions and statements. During this time, I asked the child again if they really wanted to participate. The child then had to verbally confirm or decline. Special attention was paid to ensuring that the children were aware of their decision and made it voluntarily, emphasizing that they had the option to withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences. This careful inclusion of participants helped ensure that all children were genuinely interested in participating, and there were no withdrawals during the research process. Even though the children in this study all consented to participating in this project, it is crucial to reflect on the process of seeking consent. Some children might consent due to feeling pressured into participating by authority figures like parents or researchers (James, 2001). It is also essential to note that consent encompasses more than just participating in an interview but rather also includes information about privacy, data collection and confidentiality.

### 4.4.3 Privacy and confidentiality

For ensuring the safety of the participants and their data, privacy and confidentiality are critical when conducting research. The aspect of privacy includes the safety of the participant's private affairs and life, while confidentiality is related to concealing a participant's personal information so that they cannot be identified due to the information they have given in the research process (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the safety of the participant's privacy and confidentiality, which indicates various measures that need to be taken by the researcher during the whole research project (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Beazley et al., 2009).

In this research project, all information that might give away a person's identity has been removed or anonymized. Beazley et al. (2009) highlight the role of pseudonymization in research which has also been important in this study. Pseudonymization defines the altering of names and using pseudonyms. In this project, all the participants' names have been changed. The participants are therefore referred to by other names to prevent their information from being linked back to them individually. During the interviews, participants' real names were never recorded digitally. Their names were not mentioned on the voice recordings and were not used when transcribing the material. Instead, pseudonyms were immediately used for transcription to ensure their real identities

remained undisclosed. Pseudonyms were selected through brainstorming and using names that were common in Austrian children.

That I as a researcher would give my all to ensure the safety of the participants' and gatekeepers' privacy and confidentiality, was stated both written in the information letter as well as verbally when talking with the gatekeepers and children before the interview. Privacy and confidentiality also concerns the storage of data. All data, including the audio recordings, have been securely stored in accordance with NTNU and Sikt guidelines. As mentioned before, I have used both a recording device and a phone to record the interviews. Furthermore, prior consent was sought for the use of a voice recorder during conversations, and participants were informed about the purpose of recording and the subsequent handling of recordings. Informing participants and their gatekeepers about the storage arrangement of their data was crucial to ensure transparency and adherence to privacy protocols.

### 4.4.4 Power imbalances, children's voices and reflexivity

Due to children's positions in many societies, power imbalances can often be found. Adult's views on children shape how children and their voices are perceived. When conducting ethical research, especially with children, it is crucial for the researcher to negotiate the power imbalances between the participants and researcher (Gallagher, 2008; Punch, 2002). The relationship and how children are perceived can influence the research process in many different aspects, for example how comfortable the participants feel during the fieldwork might influence the children's answers and behavior. As stated in chapter 4.4.1., researchers often take on roles and strategies in research with children in an attempt to reduce the power imbalance. The inclusion of participatory methods can also impact power dynamics, but it is also important to note that they cannot completely transcend them (Gallagher, 2008). Even though there are strategies for decreasing power imbalance during the field work and when engaging with the children, there can also be a power imbalance in other aspects of the research process for example when producing or interpreting the data. Power is not inherently evil but can be strategically employed, and the challenge is to avoid domination while using power (Gallagher, 2008). It is therefore crucial for the researcher to be aware of possible power imbalances and the fact that some imbalance might never be completely resolved, even though there are aspects in the research design that can decrease them like the chosen methods or location (Spyrou, 2011).

A recurring theme in child-centered research as well as in the field of childhood studies is the concept of "the child's voice" (l'Anson, 2013). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) emphasizes the importance of listening to children's voices. Researchers should therefore listen to children's voices, who have often been silenced and marginalized (l'Anson, 2013; Spyrou, 2011). Although the importance of giving children a voice has been highlighted in childhood studies, voice is a complex and heavily debated concept. Children's voices are often perceived to be authentic and innocent. However, challenges are associated with translation, interpretation, mediation, and representation. The production and interpretation of children's voices involve adults in many steps, and they often interpret children's statements based on their own assumptions, knowledge, and understandings. Consequently, the representation of children's voices becomes a significant concern, raising questions about the real authenticity and representation of children's voices (James, 2007). L'Anson (2013) adds that children's voices might also be misused without acknowledging their limits. Limits occur due to children's voices being shaped by assumptions and ideas about childhood.

Another issue concerning children's voices is the homogenization of children's voices. Children's voices tend to be perceived to be the same within every child. Many aspects like children's experiences that shape the diversity of their voices therefore are often not taken into consideration when talking about children's voices. This step, again, leads to the marginalization of children's voices (James, 2007). A shift in viewing children's voices encourages a more critical engagement with children's voices in research. Spyrou (2011) argues that the concept of children's voices needs to be discussed and reflected upon. L'Anson (2013) adds that the concept of children's voices should be transformed from a simplified concept into a complex subject that calls for a critical examination. Researchers have attempted to address this by pluralizing voices or employing more sophisticated methodologies. Furthermore, silence or the absence of voice as well as nonverbal voices should be acknowledged while engaging in research with children (Spyrou, 2016). By critically reflecting on assumptions as well as factors that influence the voices, children's voices are recognized as being a complex concept and construct (Spyrou, 2011). Children's voices and silences were crucial aspects for me as a researcher and this research project, that I wanted to acknowledge and listen to as best as possible. During the interviews, I actively listened to the participant's narratives and also allowed moments of silence. Children's voices were also essential to consider when analyzing and interpreting the data. As a researcher, I am aware that I cannot fully represent the reality or the true voices of the children. Nevertheless, I strived to the best of my ability to provide participants with the opportunity for their narratives, voices and silences to be heard by reflecting on this research and taking their perspectives seriously.

For being aware of children's voices, the circumstances that shape them as well as general decisions made in the research processes and design, reflexivity holds significant importance. Reflexivity involves the practice of researchers acknowledging and critically examining their own perspectives and positions in the research process. It involves decisions as well as beliefs that may influence the research design, data collection, analysis, and much more. Even though this sub-chapter focuses on reflexivity, it is crucial to note that reflexivity is intertwined with every step of a research process, rather than being a separate concern. Reflexivity is indeed essential in all aspects of the research process, spanning from the design phase, choice of research methods, data analysis, and interactions with research participants (Abebe, 2009). Throughout this research project, various situations and instances called for different forms of reflexivity. In this research, I tried to reflect as often as possible, being self-aware of choices I have made and how they might affect people around me. This included for example aspects of language, my position within the research process or the interpretation of data. Especially how children's voices are heard and represented call for the researcher's reflexivity (Spyrou, 2011). Reflexivity therefore necessitates a deep understanding of oneself as a researcher and the recognition of how personal perspectives shape the interpretation and presentation of research findings.

## 4.5 Analysis of the data

For analyzing data in qualitative research, various approaches can be used. A common analytical approach is thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis aims at identifying repeating patterns within the collected data. Through coding and exploring patterns, themes have been developed, which were then analyzed and interpreted. Therefore, the researcher is demanded to engage with the data to create meaningful insights and answers to the posed research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within this research project, various forms of data have been produced. On one

hand, verbal data was gathered by interviewing the participants. On the other hand, written and drawn data was produced by including the participatory tools of ranking and drawing. Thematic analysis, therefore, seemed the most suitable for developing themes across different forms of data.

Braun and Clarke (2022) proposed a guideline for an analysis plan, consisting of six important steps. Phase 1 includes the researcher's familiarization with the dataset. This step encompasses transcribing as well as reading through the dataset. Transcribing can be defined as the process of converting or translating verbal or non-verbal data into written form. The process of transcription must be carried out with great care, as it constitutes an essential component for ensuring the quality of qualitative data (Misoch, 2014). While transcribing I got familiar with the data and already discovered some patterns throughout the interviews and the data. As mentioned before, in this research project, all interviews were recorded in accordance with the participant's given consent. After conducting the interviews, the audio recordings were listened to alone and then translated into a written text. All the written transcripts were then additionally translated from German into English. After completing Phase 1, Phase 2 can be approached. In this phase, the researcher starts coding the data. This includes working systematically through the data set while identifying important statements which might be relevant for interpretation of the data. For marking said segments, codes are created and labeled. Codes are labels assigned to segments of data that help researchers organize, categorize, and make sense of the data by identifying recurring themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this research project, I have used the program NVIVO to ensure a clear and systematic process. Even though this research was designed to focus on semantic codes, a few latent codes were also created. Semantic codes directly represent the content and include statements made by the participants. Latent codes encompass implicit themes that might not be immediately evident in the data. The majority of the codes, however, were based on actual statements given by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Phase 3 then requires the researcher to come up with themes, by grouping the generated codes. Codes with a similar meaning or idea can be categorized into an initial theme. The themes created within this step might not be fixed but can be adjusted throughout the next analysis steps. This was a present concern in this research, where the themes as well as the importance of individual codes and themes has changed a few times. Phase 4 and 5 both include the process of defining and reviewing the developed themes. While in phase 4 the focus lies on reviewing the themes and the dataset, phase 5 is about naming and defining the themes for the interpretation of the data. The final step, phase 6, is considered to be writing the analysis and report. While notes and smaller reports can be written during every phase, phase 6 includes the final process of analysis and interpretation by creating a coherent research report (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

## 4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented insights into the design of this research project. This study takes on a qualitative approach and includes an individual semi-structured interview as well as participatory tools, which were ranking and drawing. Additionally, this chapter outlines the recruitment process and provides details about the recruited participants. Furthermore, the methodology and methods have been explored and how methodologies can ensure how children's voices can be heard. Following this, the chapter discusses ethical considerations including the role of the researcher, consent, voluntary participation as well as confidentiality and reflexivity. Lastly, it introduces the data

production and process of analysis, superficially discussing the utilization of thematic analysis for analyzing the data which also includes the step of transcribing data from spoken to written form. The subsequent chapter will introduce the participants and their chosen animated characters in more detail before delving into the analysis and interpretation of the data in regard to answering the research questions.

# 5 An introduction to the participants and their chosen animated characters

The following analysis aims to gain a deeper understanding on how children interpret animated characters, especially in regard to gender. Drawing from prior research, this study strives to bridge research gaps and potentially spark further research interests into this topic. The findings of this study will be explored in one comprehensive and detailed analysis chapter. This chapter, chapter 5, is intended to serve as an introduction and provide an insight into the children who participated in the research project, as well as their selected animated characters. Each child's introduction includes a brief description of the child, a short presentation of their chosen characters, as well as where the participant knows them from, and what they like or dislike about their animated character. The subsequent analysis chapter will expand upon these introductions, thus utilizing them as a springboard for exploring the research questions. This introductory chapter aims to be more descriptive, while the following analysis chapter delves deeper into how children discuss, describe, and interpret animated characters.

As outlined in chapter 4.3.1, participants were given the opportunity to choose the animated characters they wished to discuss during the interview. This approach empowered participants to influence the research through their participation and expertise. Giving importance to the voices of children and considering the participants of the research as experts on the topic is particularly crucial, especially when examining children's interpretations (Duvall, 2010).

The following table gives a clearer overview on the children's pseudonyms, their ages as well as their chosen animated characters.

| Participant and Age | Characters they like | Characters they dislike |
|---|---|---|
| **Nico (12)** | Tom & Jerry | Teletubbies |
| **Sarah (13)** | Bibi Blocksberg | King Magnifico |
| **Paul (11)** | Obelix | Hello Kitty |
| **Daniel (10)** | Bart Simpson | Goofy |
| **Hannah (10)** | Carmen Sandiego | King Magnifico |
| **Lisa (11)** | Olaf | Hans |
| **Amelie (13)** | Doc McStuffin | Tom & Jerry |
| **Max (12)** | Kai | Lord Garmadon |
| **Leon (12)** | Gojo Satoru, Yuji Itadori | - |
| **Christof (12)** | Zane | The Overlord |
| **Robin (11)** | Spongebob Squarepants | Squidward Tentacles |

**Table 1: Participants and their chosen animated characters**

The table demonstrates a broad spectrum of character selections, spanning from classic figures such as Obelix or Tom and Jerry to more contemporary ones like King Magnifico. In the next step, I would like to present each child and their chosen animated characters individually. I have structured the introduction of participants and characters to initially focus on those whose gender is rather ambiguous. Following this, I delve into

descriptions of animated characters that are more gendered for example by exhibiting binary gender-specific traits.

*Robin* is 11 years old and chose both his characters from the same universe and franchise, Spongebob Squarepants. He has gotten to know his characters from watching the Spongebob movie series, where his characters play a crucial role. SpongeBob Squarepants, the main character of the franchise, is a yellow anthropomorphic sea sponge who lives in a pineapple under the sea, in the fictional underwater city of Bikini Bottom. Together with his friends, SpongeBob embarks on various adventures throughout the show, often finding himself in humorous situations. Robin admires that Spongebob is a cute, yellow character. For characters he dislikes he talked about Spongebob's neighbor and colleague, Squidward Tentacles, an octopus who is characterized by his cynical attitude and being annoyed by the optimism of SpongeBob and his friends. Robin argues that he does not like Squidward due to him being grumpy and not very nice to Spongebob.

*Nico* is 12 years old. His liked characters were Tom and Jerry from the television series with the same name. Nico knows this show through his dad, due to them watching it together when he was younger. The show revolves around Tom, a cat, and Jerry, a mouse, and their comedic rivalry. The two characters chase each other throughout numerous episodes of the show but never succeed in catching each other. Their constant pursuit frequently leads to chaos and amusement, which is one of the reasons why Nico likes the show as well as the characters. As characters he does not like, Nico talked about the Teletubbies, which is a television show that tells the stories of four colorful characters known as the Teletubbies. Each Teletubby has a distinct appearance and personality. With the television screens on their bellies, images and videos relevant to the plot are often displayed in the episodes, which often revolve around themes such as friendship or discoveries. When Nico was younger, he came across them several times on TV. He told me that he recently saw a video of them on YouTube, which reminded him of the time when he used to watch them on TV. Even back then, according to Nico, he was not very fond of the show, thinking the idea of the show as well as the world setting and the characters themselves were weird. Thus, he was never really interested in the characters and therefore he did not engage any further with that show.

*Amelie* is 13 years old. Doc McStuffins was one of her favorite animated characters as well as TV show growing up. Doc McStuffins is an animated television show, which follows the story of a young girl named Dottie "Doc" McStuffins, who dreams of becoming a doctor like her mother. Doc is able to talk to and heal toys like stuffed animals and thus opens up a clinic in her backyard, where she diagnoses and treats various ailments that affect her toys. While treating her animals, situations and life lessons center around health, friendship as well as problem-solving. Amelie likes Doc McStuffins because she considers her to be a happy and helpful person and also admires that her character has her own clinic, is talented and does her own thing. Like Nico, Amelie also talked with me about Tom and Jerry. In her case, however, Tom and Jerry – the cat and the mouse who chase each other - were characters she did not like. Amelie expressed her annoyance with Tom and Jerry, citing their constant arguing in every episode. She further mentioned that she disliked the animation style and the physical appearance of the characters due to them being unrealistic and not making much sense to her.

*Leon* is 12 years old and only chose to talk about characters he likes, due to not being able to think of characters he does not like. He said that he would rather talk about two characters he likes. Both his liked characters were from his favorite animated show

Jujutsu Kaisen, a Japanese television show which revolves around the story of a high school student named Yuji Itadori who becomes involved in the world of curses and sorcery. Yuji was one of Leon's chosen characters. The main character and high school student Yuji trains to become a Jujutsu Sorcerer, a person being able to use sorcery and fight curses that threaten the world. Alongside his classmates Yuji battles dangerous curses and uncovers the mysteries of the Jujutsu world. Yuji is mentored by Gojo Satoru, Leon's second chosen character. Gojo is known for his strength, agility, and mastery of sorcery techniques, being one of the most powerful sorcerers in the series. Despite his incredible power, Gojo is also depicted as laid-back and cheerful. Regarding Leon's chosen characters, he appreciates their abilities in fighting curses and using sorcery as well as that they are strong.

*Daniel* was one of the younger children participating, being 10 years old. Bart Simpson was a character he liked and that we talked about in the interview. Bart Simpson is a central character in the television series The Simpsons, which Daniel enjoys watching. He is the eldest son of the Simpson family, known for his mischievous and rebellious nature. Bart is depicted as a typical schoolboy who often finds himself in various humorous and sometimes troublesome situations. Daniel stated that Bart Simpson is known for doing crazy things and breaking the rules which he likes about him. Daniel's disliked character Goofy was also defined by being crazy. Goofy is known from the Disney franchise and universe who appears in a wide range of roles and adventures throughout various movies and shows. Goofy is an anthropomorphic dog who is portrayed as well-meaning but somewhat clumsy, frequently finding himself in humorous and sometimes chaotic situations.

*Lisa* is 11 years old. At first, Lisa and I talked about six animated characters in total. Lisa then, however, decided to only talk in more detail about the character she likes best and the one she dislikes the most. Both her characters were from the movie Frozen, which Lisa considered to be her favorite animated movie. The story is inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Snow Queen" and revolves around the bond between two royal sisters, Elsa and Anna. Elsa, the older sister, has magical ice powers that she finds difficult to control, which causes problems for her kingdom later on. Thus, Anna sets out on a quest to rescue her sister and save the kingdom. Joining her are Kristoff, an ice harvester, Sven, Kristoff's reindeer, and Olaf, a snowman. Lisa stated that Olaf is her favorite animated character. As mentioned before, Olaf is a snowman who has been created by Elsa's magical powers. Throughout the movie, Olaf provides comic relief with his naive and humorous personality, often lightening the mood during tense moments. Lisa likes Olaf's physical appearance as a snowman – especially his arms made out of twigs and his big smile – as well as his loyalty and helpfulness to his friends. Lisa's least favorite character, Hans, was also from the movie Frozen. Hans, as stated by Lisa, is not even her least favorite character but rather her most hated character. Hans is initially introduced as a charismatic prince who becomes romantically involved with Princess Anna. However, as the story progresses, it is revealed that Hans harbors ambitions of seizing power over the kingdom. During the climax, Hans deceives Anna, exposing his love for her as a mere facade. Ultimately, his scheme is foiled. Lisa stated several times throughout the interview, that she dislikes Hans due to him repeatedly deceiving the characters. When Lisa was asked to describe Hans in three words, she said: "A complete idiot." Which emphasizes her dislike against him.

*Hannah,* who is 10 years old, initially discussed various animated characters like Lisa did, but eventually chose to focus on her most and least preferred character. Her favorite

character is Carmen Sandiego who she knows from the modern television show of the same name. Carmen Sandiego is the protagonist of a franchise, which revolves around Carmen, a thief stealing valuable artifacts and treasures. Throughout the franchise, Carmen Sandiego's character has been portrayed differently. Hannah and I, however, talked about the newer Netflix animated series which reimagines Carmen Sandiego as a thief who travels around the world to steal from criminals and the evil organization V.I.L.E. Despite her criminal activities, Carmen Sandiego is portrayed as a charismatic and intelligent anti-heroine. Being clever and having a good taste in fashion are a few reasons why Hannah likes her so much. Hannah's disliked character was King Magnifico from the animated movie Wish, who she got to know through watching the movie with some of her friends at her latest birthday party. King Magnifico is the primary antagonist who reigns over the kingdom Rosas and possesses magical abilities enabling him to fulfill wishes. Throughout the movie, Asha, the main character, starts questioning his methods for maintaining and gaining power and discovers his scheme of manipulating people's wishes for his gain. Hannah does not like him due to him not following rules. She later on added "I don't like him because he didn't listen to his wife".

*Sarah* is 13 years old and also talked about King Magnifico in her interviews as a character she does not like. First, however, I want to elaborate on her favorite character Bibi Blocksberg. Bibi Blocksberg is a popular German audio drama and animated character. The main character, Bibi Blocksberg, is a young witch who lives in a small village and experiences a variety of adventures with her family and friends, using her magical abilities. Sarah grew up listening to Bibi's audio books as well as watching the TV show. She especially likes Bibi's open-mindedness, her courage and the adventures she is on. Sarah also chose King Magnifico from the animated movie Wish to talk about as a character she does not like. As described before, King Magnifico is the antagonist of the movie, who possesses and misuses magical powers to fulfill or deny fulfilling wishes. The king being deceitful and cunning are characteristics that Sarah dislikes. Sarah does, however, appreciate that he is clever and powerful.

*Paul* is 11 years old and in his interview we talked about Obelix from Asterix and Obelix as well as Hello Kitty. Obelix is one of the protagonists from the universe of Asterix (often also known as "Asterix and Obelix"). Paul liked reading the comic book series of said universe which then also introduced him to the animated movies and television show. Set in the Roman-Gaulish war, Obelix is depicted as a Gaulish warrior who is known for his immense strength, which he gained by falling into a cauldron filled with magical potion when he was younger. Even though Obelix is taller and broader than most of the other characters in the universe, Obelix is also depicted as a kindhearted and loyal friend to Asterix and other characters, which Paul admires about his chosen character. As a character he does not like, Paul chose to talk about Hello Kitty, an anthropomorphic white kitten with a round and large head, and bow or flower adornment on her ear. Hello Kitty typically appears as a cheerful and friendly character, often depicted with a happy expression and a cute pink or red bow. Hello Kitty is often portrayed as a cute and joyous character. Paul got to know Hello Kitty through his older sister, and reasoned his choice of character as followed:

> Paul: So, a character with whom I also had an experience with is Hello Kitty. My older sister was a big fan when we were both quite small. She always had Hello Kitty on everything, and I didn't like her so much. My sister had a lot of stuff from her, like bedding or even a birthday cake once. That's why I don't like Hello Kitty so much.

He then added:

It is worth pointing out, as Paul stated, that he chose this character due to his childhood memories connected to it.

*Max* is 12 years old and talked with me about Kai as well as Garmadon from Ninjago. Kai is one of the main characters in the LEGO Ninjago franchise, which includes TV shows, movies, and video games. Max is a fan of the show and movies as well as the LEGO products themselves. His liked character Kai is one of the ninjas in this franchise and has the ability of fire. Kai is known for being brave and also being the leader of the group of ninjas. Throughout the series, Kai undergoes significant character development, learning valuable lessons about teamwork, responsibility, and courage. Even though Max admired the character development of his character, he also added that Kai adapts himself a lot and that Max does not always support the decisions Kai made during the show. (Lord) Garmadon is one of the villians in the Ninjago series. Garmadon's pursuit of power eventually led to his corruption by dark forces. Throughout the show, he often fights against the ninjas, including Kai. Max dislikes Garmadon for being cruel and evil.

*Christof* is 11 years old. Similarly to Max he also chose characters from the Ninjago franchise to discuss during our interviews. Next to Max's liked character Kai, Zane is also one of the ninjas. He is a highly skilled and intelligent android, who has the ability of ice. Due to his android nature, Zane possesses advanced technological abilities. Christof likes his abilities as well as his intelligence the most. One of the antagonists of the show was the Overlord, which was Christof's character he did not like. The Overlord was a dark and powerful entity at first, before turning into a person and making it his goal to conquer the land and cast it into darkness. Christof finds the Overlord's malevolent actions and attacks on the ninjas to be disagreeable traits.

The objective of this chapter was to provide an overview of the participants and their selected characters. While some characters were chosen only by one participant, there were also instances where characters were similar or even identical. The brief descriptions of the participants and characters aim to offer an overview. This chapter and introduction will be pertinent for further analysis and will serve as a background for delving deeper into children's interpretation of animated characters in relation to gender.

# 6 Analysis: children's interpretation of animated characters in terms of gender

This detailed analysis chapter will be dedicated to the (sub-)research questions, emphasizing the intertwining of the research findings. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the overarching research question: "How do children make sense of animated characters in terms of gender?". I will begin by examining how children discuss their selected characters comprehensively, encompassing both character descriptions and their preferences and aversions towards them. While the introduction has already outlined some key points, the analysis chapter delves deeper into this subject, adopting a more analytical approach to uncover underlying patterns and themes. Subsequently, I will explore the first sub-research question that focuses on characteristics in animated characters: "How do children interpret the characteristics of animated characters in regard to gender?" It is crucial to acknowledge that while the term "characteristics" encompasses a broad spectrum including appearance, physical attributes, personality, and behavior, I intentionally utilized this term during interactions with children to gain insights into their perception of these traits, particularly in the context of gender. My curiosity and interest as a researcher was particularly piqued by how children articulate and understand characteristics concerning both their chosen characters and gender, thus rendering the children's definitions and comprehension of "characteristics" a central aspect of the interviews. Finally, I will delve into the second sub-research question: "How do children navigate gender norms through their interpretations of animated characters?". For generating data, individual visual stimuli interviews combined with the participatory tools of drawing and ranking have been conducted. The participants were asked to choose animated characters they like and dislike, through which their interpretation of gender was then explored.

## 6.1 Children's description of their animated characters

Before I could delve into the actual research topic of "Animated Characters and Gender", it was important for me to get to know the children and their selected characters better. As one of my initial steps in my interviews, I asked the participants to introduce their characters to me. Subsequently, we discussed aspects such as the character's name and where they knew the character from. To steer the conversation towards gender and explore the role of gender in interpreting characters, I also asked the children to first talk a little about the appearance of the character, due to appearance often being considered to be a prominent aspect in the sense-making of gender (Elsen, 2018). For this, the children had pictures of their characters available, which they used for their descriptions. It is worth mentioning that participants were asked to describe their characters without any specific restrictions, allowing them the freedom to share what they deemed important and relevant about their character.

Robin for example described his liked character Spongebob Squarepants in just a few words by being a cute, yellow sponge, who wears an overall with a tie and works in a burger joint. Thus, he described him by his physical appearance, personality and his profession. Similarly, Leon described both his liked characters Gojo Saturo and Yuji Itadori by their physical appearance, their roles throughout the show and their

superpowers. Leon explains that Gojo has a superpower called „Domain Expansion" and „Infinity", where no one can touch him and that Gojo's appearance is characterized by his blue eyes and white hair. Gojo's personality is shaped by him being strong, important to the story and to other characters as well as being funny. Personality, physical appearance and profession were also present in Amelie 's description of her animated characters. Amelie described her liked character Doc McStuffims as a very open, happy and helpful person. Amelie also admires that her character has her own practice, is talented and does her own thing. When Amlie further elaborated on her characters description, she stated following on Doc's physical appearance:

> Amelie: Hmm. I don't know. It's always hard to describe in animated series because usually, the body is very small, and the head is huge. But I would say she's rather small in terms of her body. A broader head, brown eyes, brown hair. She usually wears colors like white, purple, and pink. And she's a doctor.

Amelie also seemed to view the physique of her disliked characters as complex. She talked about Tom and Jerry, a cat and a mouse who chase each other, as characters she did not like. She said that the animation as well as the physical appearance of her disliked characters did not make a lot of sense to her due to it being quite unrealistic. In terms of personality, Tom and Jerry have been described as being stubborn, but Amelie also highlights that Jerry, the mouse, often looks very happy due to escaping Tom, the cat, who looks rather strained. Nico also chose to talk about Tom and Jerry, however as characters he likes. When describing these two characters, he also mentioned their physique by talking about their bodies, their big ears and eyes. He also adds that their abilities like running fast and being clever characterize them and their show which is why he likes these characters and their story so much. Taking both Nico's and Amelie's perspective into consideration, it is interesting to observe how one animated character has been chosen by two participants and thus has been described in different ways. Whereas Nico liked the story of Tom and Jerry's show, Amelie rather seemed to think it is repetitive and unrealistic. Daniel talked with me about Bart Simpson and Goofy. At first, Daniel described his characters by clothing, stating that his liked character Bart was wearing a red shirt, blue pants, and blue shoes in the picture. His disliked character Goofy was described as a dog, wearing white gloves, an orange sweater with a black scarf as well as a green hat and blue pants. When I asked Daniel, if there is anything else that characterizes Bart, the participant stated that Bart is known for not following rules and doing crazy things. Not only was Daniel's liked character defined by being crazy, but also his disliked animated character Goofy, which was interesting to observe. However, when I asked him to further elaborate on the difference, he stated following:

> Vanessa: Would a word come to your mind that describes Goofy?
>
> Daniel: I think he was also crazy. Yes. Also crazy.
>
> Vanessa: Is there a reason why you don't like Goofy so much?
>
> Daniel: He always did strange things. Just crazy.
>
> Vanessa: Different crazy than Bart Simpson?
>
> Daniel: Yes.
>
> Vanessa: What was different?
>
> Daniel: I don't know. I mean he did follow the rules. But he did strange and crazy things.

Daniel seemed to name that both of his characters are known for being crazy and doing crazy stuff. However, he seemed to have difficulties in putting it into words, how exactly their actions and interpretations of being crazy are different from one another.

The descriptions provided by the children, as I have described them now, were mainly focused on the appearance, clothing, or personality of the characters. The following participants, however, described their characters more in relation to their role and purpose in the respective universe. Lisa for example situated both her liked and disliked characters Olaf and Hans in the context of the movie, where the characters are from. Next to Olaf's physical appearance, of him being a snowman, she also highlighted his relevance for the story due to him having an important supporting role for the main characters Anna and Elsa. Lisa also elaborated a lot on Hans' role in the story, due to him being the antagonist. Despite her characters being from the same movie, it is interesting to note that Lisa did not put them and their stories in relation to each other but rather discussed them singularily. Like Lisa, Paul also highlighted his character's role and story, especially when talking about his favorite character Obelix from Asterix and Obelix. The story takes place in Gaul where Obelix and his friend Asterix overcome obstacles and fight their enemies, the Roman legionnaires. Paul explained that Obelix as well as the Gauls in general usually win, due to them using potions. He also adds that he admires that they always work together. Carmen Sandiego, Hannah's liked character as well as her disliked character King Magnifico were also discussed in relevance to the story of their shows and movies. When Hannah was asked, if there are any character traits or behaviors that characterize King Magnifico, she answered that he is known for not following rules. Even though Sarah also chose King to talk about as a character she does not like, she mentioned different characteristics when describing the King than Hannah. Whereas Hannah talked about the King breaking the rules or not granting wishes, Sarah elaborates on his knowledge of using magic as well as his trait of being sneaky and deceitful. Despite both Hannah and Sarah disliking King Magnifico, it was also observable that both of them focussed on and (dis-) liked different aspects of the character. Max and Christof both selected liked and disliked characters from the same universe Ninjago. Even though both of the participants gave a broader description of their characters one by one, the other participant's character was barely mentioned, despite being from the same universe.

As a researcher, I found it intriguing to observe that gender was not explicitly mentioned in any of the participant's descriptions of their characters. None of them explicitly stated the gender of their characters. However, the children utilized pronouns in the German language typically associated with a particular gender when describing their characters, such as "She is known for" or "He is wearing." This highlights the inherent connection between language, interpretation and gender, being a production and process of repeated linguistic acts (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007; Mendes & Carter, 2008). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the participants' choice of characters is connected to gender. The majority of the selected animated characters were male, with only a few female characters chosen. According to Götz and Lemish (2012), main characters in children's television programs are twice as common to be male than female characters. Generally, there is a higher amount of male characters overall in animation as stated by Demiral (2020), which could explain the number of male characters in ratio to female or ambiguous characters. In regard to children's talk about animated characters and their descriptions, it is essential to note that the children's description of characters is closely connected to their understanding of such characters. In previous research by Attard and Cremona (2020) they concluded that children's understanding of animated characters is

complex and intertwined with many different aspects of the character as well as the child and its social and cultural context. This aligns especially with theoretical perspectives of social constructionism and feminist and queer audience studies which highlight the importance of the social and cultural context when interpreting media (Mendes & Carter, 2008). Given the project's context, it's essential to recognize that the children talked about characters they choose in relation to their personal (dis-) likability. With this in mind, I included a section in the interview where I talked with the children about what they like and dislike about their selected characters.

## 6.2 What children like and dislike about their characters

Attard and Cremona (2020) argue that "[...] children understand cartoon characters in terms of the characters' identity and portrayal, attitudes and behaviour, nature and character, features and attributes, living environments, and social relationships." (Attard & Cremona, 2020). Hamilton and Dynes (2023) add that children decide if they like or do not like a certain character by many different aspects, encompassing artworks as well as the values of a character that are also familiar and important to the children (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). This also encompasses the construct and production of gender. I therefore wanted to explore if and how gender can be found when children discuss what they like and dislike in their characters.

The participants considered the artwork as a significant factor in their choice of specific animated characters for discussion. For some participants like Leon, the art style of an animated character was a crucial aspect of their liking of an animated character. In the participatory activity of ranking characteristics, he ranked "[...] how well he is drawn." as the most important characteristic of his character. When asked if he could elaborate on if there is a specific reason for why he ranked the traits the way he did, Leon argued: "Yes, because in an anime, I think, and with the characters, it always depends on how well they are drawn and such.". Thus, he stated that especially in anime - animation produced and created in Japan (LaMarre, 2009) – the artwork of an animated character is an essential criteria for his liking of a character. Other participants like Amelie however, stated the opposite to Leon's opinion, explaining that they don't like certain characters due to their animation. In the following interview excerpt, Amelie and I talked about her chosen characters Doc McStuffins and Tom and Jerry. While she chose Doc McStuffins as an animated character she liked, Tom and Jerry were characters she was not too fond of. In the last section, I have already briefly explored Amelie's opinion on the animation of her chosen characters. The following excerpt however discusses her opinion in more detail:

> Vanessa: Is it okay if we briefly talk about Tom and Jerry?
>
> Amelie: Yes. I always found the animations interesting. So... Generally, I found it funny. It's not that I don't like it, but eventually, it gets annoying. It's like, as you can see in the picture, always the same. The cat chases the mouse. Sometimes Jerry fights back, I think that's his name.
>
> Vanessa: And how would you describe them in this picture?
>
> Amelie: Well, what I always found strange about the series is that, for example, if something falls on a person, they become flat. Or these mega-sized hands. The depiction of these characters is totally wrong. In the cartoon series, they just look so animated because a cat doesn't have such huge hands, and a cat doesn't walk on two legs.
>
> Vanessa: Would you say that about the doctor too?

> Amelie: Hmm, I think it's different there. Sure, she was probably also totally wrong in terms of animation with the mega-wide head, but I think it's different. Instead of a cat and mouse endlessly fighting, a doctor healing stuffed animals, I don't believe that happens in reality. But I think it's closer to reality.

It is interesting to note that Amelie talks about animation in both the characters she likes and dislikes, stating that animation might not always be realistic and portraying the real world. She, however, also argues that the setting, story and characters play an important role in the animation and its relation to reality. Though it is also interesting to observe that she said that the rather unrealistic animation might make more sense in her liked character than her disliked characters. Even though some previous studies suggest that some children have difficulties in separating animation from the real world, some statements made by participants do not align with these findings (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Amelie for example seems to make distinctions and acknowledge that there is a difference between animation and the real world.

When the participants were asked to name what they like or dislike in their chosen animated characters, a range of personality traits and internal qualities have been mentioned. Paul described his character Obelix as kind, optimistic and always being in a good mood, which he likes about him. Robin for example likes SpongeBob for being friendly, mentioning that „Being friendly is important". When describing his character Bart, Daniel talks about his wild nature but also mentions that he thinks that Bart is grateful and funny. He later added: „I know many people who are like that. And I also really like that. That's why these are good characteristics for me." When I asked Daniel to elaborate on what he means by the phrase „good characteristics for me", he explained it by saying: „For me personally. Not everyone has to have the same opinion." In his statement he highlights his personal value of his character's personality traits. Daniel and Robin, however, were not the only participants, stating that they like their character's trait best due to their own personal value of the characteristics. Sarah for example likes her character Bibi for being open–minded along other traits like being clever and friendly. Sarah then added the following:

> Sarah: Because I also like it in other people, real people, when they have these qualities. And especially the open-mindedness. I really like it when people are very open and flexible. That's why I chose it.

> Vanessa: You said you like it when people have an open-minded nature...

> Sarah: And then all these things. I find it cool because that's a bit 'me' too. And then I like it when people are like that too.

It seems that Sarah as well as Daniel like their characters due to them valuing characteristics and personality that are important to them. Paul also mentions that being friendly is important. However, it remains unclear whether this importance is personally significant to him or if it is a reflection of societal norms. According to the theoretical perspectives of social constructionism, feminist post-structuralism and cultural studies, social norms contribute to shaping how children make sense of values which are important to them. The process of sense-making is therefore embedded in a specific context and the norms existing within it. Thus, Paul's statement could suggest that the values that are important to him reflect social norms existing in Austria, combined with expectations on which values should be perceived to be important to Austrian citizens (Rippl, 2012; Elsen, 2018). Statements given by the participants highlight the children's own values when talking about animation and align with previous research, arguing that values play a major role in children's likability and understanding of animated characters (Kostas, 2016; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Further research by Attard and Cremona

(2020) also suggest that children have a desire to identify themselves with the animated cartoon characters they like, which can also be seen in Sarah's statement by her mentioning that Bibi is a bit like her. As these statements by the participants show, character's personality traits were the most mentioned reason for liking and disliking a character. For some children like Max the setting and story of their characters seemed to be important for the participants in making sense of liking or disliking a character as well. Max for example talked about his favorite character Kai, a ninja, by mentioning that he admires his special power of fire. When I asked him, why he thinks so, he answered:

> Max: Because fire is a cool power, and it also suits the character. He also works in a forge. And when you think of forges, you also think of fire. His self-confidence is good, and it's very close to his character. I like the leader's instinct, and the appearance and suits […]

Max seems to make sense of his character and his favorite trait by relating it to the story and the setting of the show, thus embedding the character in a specific context. For me as a researcher, it was also interesting to explore how children talk about characters they like in comparison to characters they dislike. A number of participants seemed to idealize their favorite characters by only mentioning things and characteristics they like about them. They stated that there is not anything negative or anything they dislike about their character. When Hannah was asked if there is anything she dislikes about Carmen Sandiego, the following statement was made:

> Vanessa: Is there anything about her that you don't like?

> Hannah: No. She's my favorite character.

Hannah underlines that there is nothing she dislikes about Carmen Sandiego, due to her being her favorite character. Similarly, when Robin and Daniel were asked if there is anything that they do not like about their liked characters, they also denied the question. In this regard, it is crucial to note that this might have been a product of the research design and the task I asked them to do. Given that Hannah was asked to discuss her liked character, she might have refrained from expressing any negative sentiments about Carmen Sandiego our conversation, considering the character's status as her favorite. Nevertheless, the absence of favorable or unfavorable characteristics extended to disliked characters as well. For instance, participants like Nico struggled to identify any appealing attributes in their disliked animated characters. Nico, for example, mentioned when talking about his disliked characters Teletubbies, that he thinks they are strange and acknowledged his limited familiarity with them, which hindered him from attributing any positive qualities to their characters. On the other hand, some children, however, also discussed negative characteristics in the characters they like as well as positive characteristics in the characters they dislike. Christof talks about his character Zane from Ninjago and negative characteristics as follows by explaining its relevance to the overall story and character development of Zane:

> Vanessa: Okay, interesting. And is there anything about him that you don't like?

> Christof: Hm, difficult. Well, I like almost everything about him. So, he was once, I don't know which season that was, transformed into an ice villain. So, he was still Zane but transformed. Then he attacked the ninjas. But he can't help it because he just became that. And he attacked them. Eventually, he turned back into Zane because he could remember. Mhm. So maybe... But he also doesn't do it often... Almost never... He has very high knowledge, and maybe he corrects the others. But I think that almost never happens. That's what I would think. So, I actually like almost everything about him.

At first, Christof stated that he liked almost everything about his character, but at the same time, he explained how he did not like his role in one season. It is also noteworthy

that Christof seemed to defend his character by saying that he does not do that often, in fact, never. Additionally, he mentioned that Zane sometimes corrects others due to his intelligence, but then again, he said that this does not happen regularly. Finally, Christof argued once again that he likes almost everything about his selected character. Similar to Christof, Sarah and Robin also found and discussed positive aspects in their disliked animated characters. For example, Sarah appreciates that her disliked character King Magnifico is clever, kind, and powerful, teaching the magic he used throughout the film himself. Robin also emphasized that his disliked character Squidward can occasionally be nice to the other characters, for example, by helping SpongeBob, although he usually tends to be grumpy and unfriendly. These examples demonstrate how complex the interpretation of characters and their likability is. In relation to children's interpretation according to feminist and queer audience studies, the participants statements highlight how their sense-making is shaped by many aspect like the setting of the character or the children's own personal values (Attard & Cremona, 2020; Corsaro, 2017; Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Furthermore, it is essential to mention that children's emphasis on values that align with those within their environment is shaped by norms that exist within the children's social context (Attard & Cremona, 2020). According to social constructionism and cultural studies, this aspect should be taken into account when examining children's interpretations of animated characters. Despite the pervasive influence of gender norms in society, as it is often argued within the theoretical perspectives used for this thesis (Butler, 1990; Kelly-Ware, 2016), it was intriguing to observe that the children did not explicitly consider gender when discussing their character preferences.

## 6.3 Gender, language and current societal debates

As the previous sections explored, gender was not explicitly present when exploring participants' descriptions of their selected animated characters and reasons for liking or disliking them. In regard to designing this research, I included a section on gender as a general topic in the interview, to gain insight on how children make sense of gender before talking about how they interpret and navigate it in terms of their animated characters. According to James and Prout (2015) gender is a fundamental aspect that shapes childhood and children's experiences. Children's understanding of gender and its representation in animated characters is embedded in the social context and in power dynamics (Butler, 1990). Thus, children's understanding does not always match adults' interpretations (Martínez-García & Fernández–García, 2021). Hence, I first asked the participants if they have ever heard of or if they are familiar with the term "gender" which is the same term in both German and English. Some of the children stated that they have heard the term before. Others, however, said that they are not familiar with the word and its meaning. I then asked children who were unfamiliar with the term "gender" if they were aware of the word "Geschlecht" (German term for sex). Despite the distinction made in research and literature between the terms "gender" and "sex," highlighting their non-interchangeability and culturally constructed nature (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007), both terms are commonly used interchangeably in the German language and in Austrian contexts. In German, the term for "gender" is primarily employed in the field of gender studies, whereas "sex" is more prevalent in everyday language (Dirim & Mecheril, 2018). Since the process of gender performance and interpretation of language and discourses are shaped within a specific context, it is important to highlight the role of language used among the participants in Austria. As Butler (1990) suggests that both sex and gender are intertwined and culturally influenced, I chose to use the word "sex", which is more commonly used in Austria, for

children who were unfamiliar with the term "gender". Hence, when I asked about the term "Geschlecht," even children who were not familiar with the term "gender" responded positively.

The participants were then asked to elaborate on what this word meant to them. However, when asked to describe the term, a variety of responses emerged. The initial confidence expressed in acknowledging familiarity with the term was often tempered by uncertainty and confusion when attempting to define it. Some participants openly admitted their uncertainty while trying to articulate the meaning of the term. For instance, Paul described gender as a defining characteristic of a person but expressed repeated uncertainty about its precise meaning.

> Vanessa: Okay, now we'll make a super small change of topic. Have you ever heard of the term Gender?
>
> Paul: Yes.
>
> Vanessa: What do you understand by Gender? How would you describe the term?
>
> Paul: Well, I don't know much about it. But maybe how one describes a person? I can't say it well. Maybe whether it's a thing or a person or something? I'm not so familiar with it.

Paul seemed to understand gender as a characteristic that helps describing or categorizing an individual. Other children also mentioned a definition, which was however different to Paul´s way of describing a person. The most common answer and interpretation was shaped by the binary concept of gender. Daniel for example described gender as "Man or Woman", whereas Leon and Christof defined gender as "the differences between man or woman". According to Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, the exposure to gender frameworks is essential for the production and performance of gender. The binary of gender is still dominant in Austrian society and thus still important for children when making sense of gender, due to them navigating gender by seeking cues around them (Paechter, 2015). Such cues in children's environment also include societal discussions and discourses on gender (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015; Martínez-García & Fernández–García, 2021; Kostas, 2016). Max was one of the participants who understood gender in binary terms. However, when I later asked Max if he considered something to be typical for a boy or a girl, his idea of gender seemed to be shaped by the understanding that societal discussions and efforts are challenging traditional gender norms.

> Max: Well, when I was little, we always said, for example, regarding colors, that girls are more pink, and boys are more blue or something like that. We used to say that a lot back then. It's not so common today. And that girls, for example, play more with Barbie, and boys play more with superheroes or something like that.
>
> Vanessa: And because you said earlier, that's not so common today...
>
> Max: Yes, I think there's a protest against that and more efforts are made. That everyone has their differences. And also, girls can have blue as their favorite color and such.

Despite Max being 12 years old, he seems to be aware of how societal circumstances and norms have changed and have been reconstructed over the years. He discusses this in terms of gender norms regarding gendered colors as well as toys. This statement can be underscored by the theoretical perspectives of gender performativity and childhood studies. Butler (1990) argues that gender can be reconstructed by challenging traditional understandings of gender, whereas scholars within childhood studies highlight the children's role and agency in the process of reconstruction (James & Prout, 2015).

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It is interesting to note that mostly boys associated gender with being either male or female, whereas girls seemed to perceive gender as more complex, including other aspects like diversity or language that make up gender. Some participants like Lisa and Hannah seemed to have a more fluid perception of gender. When Lisa and I talked about gender and what it means for her, Lisa said: „it could be that, for example, a boy wants to be a girl or vice versa". Lisa's statement reflects a certain level of awareness concerning gender non-conformity and transgender experiences. However, by framing the discussion in terms of "a boy wanting to be a girl or vice versa," Lisa inadvertently reinforces a binary concept of gender. This implies that individuals are expected to align strictly with either the "boy" or "girl" category, neglecting the diverse spectrum of gender identities that extend beyond these traditional norms (Butler, 1990). Hannah's description of gender was stated as follows: "Whether one is male, female, or diverse.". With the increasing portrayal of diverse gender concepts in society and efforts to address gender inequality and binaries, many children now embrace more fluid perspectives on gender, while also being more open in challenging these traditional norms (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). The idea of diverse genders includes individuals who do not conform with societal gender norms. Concerning Hannah's choice of language, it's noteworthy that she employed the term "diverse" when referring to non-binary individuals. In Austria, gender is still a widely debated topic. With the goal of non-discrimination, inclusion, and acknowledgment of diversity, an amendment has come into effect, according to which there is now a third gender option in the law. In addition to male and female, there is now also the option "Divers," which individuals not conforming to heteronormativity can choose (Tross, 2023). Thus, Hannah's usage of the term "divers" highlights how her understanding of gender is embedded in a social context and the language used within it (Kelly-Ware, 2016).

Similarly to Paul who stated that he has heard the term gender before, but that he was not quite familiar with its meaning, Sarah also said that she knows the term gender but not its definition. Even though she had thoughts and ideas on what the term could mean or how it could be described, she was still hesitant to answer and posed a counter-question. As well as with other children, I then tried to use the term „Geschlecht" to make it easier for her to explore the topic. When asked if she knows what the term sex means she first explained it with the words "male" and "female", stating a binary interpretation of the term. Then, however, she started going back to her initial thought about gender and even used the term in her own words.

> Vanessa: Okay, those are already very interesting characters. Now I would like to talk to you about something else. Namely, about gender. Have you ever heard the term gender or what does it mean to you? Or how would you describe it?
>
> Sarah: Hm, I've heard it. I'm not quite sure about the meaning. Actually, but... Is it about the 'INNEN'? Is that gendering? What is gendering?
>
> Vanessa: Do you know the word sexes?
>
> Sarah: Yes.
>
> Vanessa: How would you describe the word sexes?
>
> Sarah: Well, male and female. So, when you mean... Well, it used to be... Ah, now I understand. It used to be that you always just said „Arzt" [*doctor*] and now, if you also say „Ärztin" [*female doctor*] for a female.

Regarding Sarah's answer another aspect of language is crucial in the children's understanding of the term gender. In the last paragraph of her interview excerpt above, she talks about using two different words for the profession of a doctor. Like Sarah, Lisa

and Amelie also described the term gender as changing up words into the female form. Lisa for example defines gender by stating that „ when you write something, you always add 'in' at the end. That means, for example, „Zuschauer – in" [*female spectator*]". Amelie made a similar statement while elaborating in more detail on its meaning than Lisa did:

> Vanessa: Now, if we make a small topic change to the topic of gender. Have you heard the word before?
>
> Amelie: Yes, for example, „Lehrer" [*teacher*], and then you put a colon and then INNEN. Hmm, using the feminine form as well, like saying „Schüler" [*students*] and „Schülerinnen" [*female students*]. So, with genders.
>
> Vanessa: Mhm.
>
> Amelie: So regarding gender: I'm completely open if people want to do that. So, I try to incorporate it into everyday life as well. Just so that I don't only say, for example, „Läufer" [*runner*], but „Läufer und Läuferin" [*runner and female runner*] or „Teilnehmer und Teilnehmerin" [*participant and female participant*]. It's not a big effort for me, and it doesn't bother me if I have to do it. I just do it. Like I said, addressing men and women and all people.

These statements associate the term gender with gendering, which is a gender-neutral approach in German language. German encompasses grammatical gender and thus gender plays a crucial role in the language (Elsen, 2018). Grammatical gender functions as a system of categorizing nouns into two or more classes, with two commonly corresponding to "male" and "female" human genders. Whereas languages like English or Turkish consist mainly of naturally unmarked and genderless nouns, the German language is shaped by the generic masculine. The masculine form of a noun is intended to refer to both women and men (Elsen, 2018). Gendering, therefore, refers to the inclusion of gender-neutral language to address concerns related to gender inclusivity and representation. Contemporary discussions on gendering are prevalent in Austrian society, with initial debates on gender and language dating back over half a decade (Tross, 2023; Elsen, 2018; Usinger, 2023). These discussions have been aiming at creating a gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive language in both written and spoken form. Back then, various attempts have been made in including both women and men in the language, for example by naming both the male and female form of a word. Inspired by the feminist movement in the 1980s, additional approaches have been developed to enhance the visibility of women in language, including the approach discussed by Sarah. For a considerable period, individuals who do not identify as male or female have been largely absent from the German language. Only in recent years, representations of more than two genders became more prevalent in the German language (Usinger, 2023). In ongoing societal debates, advocates argue that gender-neutral language promotes equality and challenges traditional gender norms embedded in linguistic structures, whereas opponents often express concerns about the practicality and potential linguistic challenges introduced by gender-neutral language (Payr, 2022; Tross, 2023). Discussions about gender-sensitive language span across educational and political settings, significantly impacting children's daily lives and influencing their understanding and construction of gender (Conry-Murray et al., 2020). As seen in Amelie's statement, without asking her, she stated her opinion on gendering, almost justifying that she tries to use gender-neutral language and approaches all genders. At first she argued that she is open if people want to gender their language, but then said that she also tries to incorporate it when speaking. Additionally, Amelie's assertion that it's "not a big effort" for her highlights arguments in Austria's society of people being against including gendering in their everyday language due to it being impractical and taking a lot of time.

Even though Amelie noted, that she tries to include all people, her focus remained primarily on the gender binary of men and women. Scholars within feminist poststructuralism highlight the role of language as well as discourses. Amelie's opinion on gendering shows how she is navigating through gender constructions around her, while simultaneously performing gender while talking about it (Gannon & Davies, 2005; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Butler, 1990). As mentioned before, it is interesting to note that only girls brought up the debate on gendering whereas the majority of boys talked about gender as male and female. Similarly to this research, girls participating in research by Kostas (2016), seem to comprehend gender from a feminist perspective more often than boys. Consequently, girls tend to perceive gender as more flexible. According to research, gender norms in western societies often seem rigid and reinforce binaries and heteronormativity (Conry-Murray et al., 2020). However, research also suggests that other approaches provide alternative perspectives and can lead to the bending of traditional gender norms (Kostas, 2016).

## 6.4 Everyone can be everything, but…

When discussing gender in general, most participants made sense of it by referring to the binary concept of gender. Participants for example associated the term with men and women or the differences between them. Only a few children had a more fluid sense of gender by stating that gender includes individuals who do not position them as either one of them. It is, however, important to note, that the statements of children who acknowledge a more fluid concept of gender, were still shaped by the binary concept of gender, mentioning and adding the term „diverse" by saying gender includes „male, female, diverse" or „when a boy wants to be a girl or vice versa". Thus, after exploring how children make sense of gender in a more general way, I wanted to explore potential gender norms and stereotypes. I, therefore, asked the question if they consider anything to be typically for boys or typically for girls or not assignable to any gender. In regard to not pushing children into the binary framework of gender, I tried to include all genders, even though this was not a common understanding of gender for some participants. Due to childhood, gender and interpretation about media being embedded in power dynamics, it was of importance to me as a researcher to talk to the children in an appropriate way (Abebe, 2019; Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015; Corsaro, 2017). Especially in regard to gender and power structures, it was crucial to not change their opinions while simultaneously not forcing binary frameworks onto them (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). When I posed questions and included multiple genders or phrased the sentence by including a more ambiguous understanding of gender, some participants answered only in regard to the binary concept, male and female, not mentioning other genders. On the other hand, other children answered, especially in regard to questions concerning gender norms, by saying that they cannot tell or attribute it to one gender.

It is interesting to note that the children who participated in this project all had ideas on things that are more common in boys or more common in girls. While clothing like dresses as well as accessories and looks have been described as markers for girls, physique, characteristics and interests have shaped the ideas about being typical for boys. Previous research indicates that boys predominantly identify themselves as gendered beings through behavioral attributes, whereas girls tend to focus more on physical attributes. Some researchers have interpreted this as one of the ways children conform to gender norms (Elsen, 2018; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). When asked if there is anything that is typical in women or girls, Nico for example stated that women are

usually into shopping, makeup and are thin. Daniel for example mentioned hair as well as accessories, when discussing both genders.

> Daniel: Oh, well. Mostly long hair and makeup. And bags.

> Vanessa: Bags? Which ones do you mean?

> Daniel: The bags you wear over your shoulder.

> Vanessa: Ah. Shoulder bag. Hm. And is there anything that boys tend to have?

> Daniel: A T-shirt. Shorter hair. Sometimes a fanny pack. But I find that weird.

A glimpse into his statement shows, that he mentioned hair as well as bags in regard to both genders. However his definition and interpretation of these looks and items differed regarding the gender. Daniel's statement emphasizes arguments made by Osgood and Giugni (2015), saying that sense-making of gender also encompasses non-human objects like materials. Thus, Daniel not only seems to include clothing and accessories in the process of interpreting gender but also gender norms that often ascribe specific objects to a gender (Kelly-Ware, 2016). It is interesting to observe that the majority of boys associated being female with clothing or looks. Although, also some girls participating in this study expressed thoughts about femininity and clothing. Lisa for example mentioned that wearing a dress is more typical for girls:

> Lisa: So, it's really difficult. The only thing I believe is with dresses. It depends on how the boy is or the girl. But I think more if it really; I can't say 'normal' anymore. But if it's like what used to be 'normal': 'boy is normally a boy,' and 'girl is normally a girl.' Then I think it's more about dresses; I believe dresses wouldn't really be worn by boys.

Even though Lisa stated that dresses are more typical for girls than boys, there is also much more to unpack when looking at her interpretation. It is interesting to see that Lisa's statement reflects a struggle with conventional gender norms and expectations. On one hand she seemed to have a more fluid understanding of gender, stating that it depends on the boy or girl if they are wearing dresses or not and thus also highlights the value of individuality. Lisa's use of the term "normal" suggests a recognition of societal standards and norms regarding gender, but she appears hesitant to endorse or conform to them fully. By her use of the term normal as well as by saying "what used to be", she underscores the shifting nature of gender norms and the challenge of navigating societal expectations. Gender norms regarding men were shaped by statements about physical appearance or interest. Nico for example stated that boys are „Mostly tall and athletic.". Being athletic and having an interest in sports has also been a prevalent theme when discussing gender norms for boys. Regarding norms about physical appearance, it is interesting to observe that it was mentioned when discussing both women and men. Whereas women were associated with being thin and dressed a certain way, statements about what is physically typical in men included being athletic or having certain interests. Its understanding and concept however varied regarding the context and gender. As the participant's interpretations suggest, appearance can be considered a critical element in understanding gender (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

One prevalent aspect that was mentioned when discussing physical gender norms about both boys and girls, is that a particular hairstyle is associated with a gender. Whereas boys usually wear short hair, girls tend to have longer hair. This has already been visible in Daniel's statement above, where he described girls with having long hair and boys usually having shorter hair. Similarly, Leon said that long hair is more common in girls, whereas shorter hair is usually worn by boys. This aligns with arguments by Paechter (2015) and Hamilton and Dynes (2023) who explored how gender norms including

hairstyles are inflected with children's understanding of gender. The binary of girls having long hair and boys having shorter hair is a common understanding among children and their sense of gender (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Paechter, 2015). When Robin was asked if there is something typical for girls, he answered "That girls often have longer hair than boys. But not always.". Interesting to note is the last section of Robin's statement. At first, he mentioned the norm of hair regarding a certain gender. He then said that even though it is more common for girls to have longer hair, it is not the case for every girl. Another answer made by Sarah, portrays a similar message:

> Sarah: No. So, I think everyone can look the way they want, and there's not really anything. 'Girls must have long hair and boys short' or something like that. I don't find that okay.

Sarah highlighted that in her opinion everyone can look how they want to. She then explicitly mentioned the norm of the gendered hairstyle as one example of many gender or societal norms. She then even expresses her dislike against such norms, stating that she does not agree with them.

> Paul: Maybe in terms of appearance: Most girls or women have longer hair, but men can have it too. But most women have it. And my sister, for example, already uses a lot of cosmetic products. She's getting into that age. But few men do that too. Everyone can actually do what they want. So, I think there isn't really something that boys do, or something typical for boys and something typical for girls. Or even in hobbies, for example. It's like, most boys play soccer, and girls might dance or do ballet. But boys can do that too, or girls can also play soccer.

In his statement, Paul seems to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes by highlighting the diversity and fluidity of gender expression. He observes that while certain traits or behaviors may be more commonly associated with one gender, such as longer hair for girls or women and the use of cosmetic products or boys playing soccer, these characteristics are not exclusive to any gender. He suggests that these stereotypes are not fixed, asserting that everyone can choose to engage in activities or behaviors regardless of gender norms. It seems, however, that his more fluid understanding of gender is still intertwined with binary norms by first naming binary gender norms but then varying his answer (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

This tendency of attributing gender norms and then denying them was also not only visible when talking about hair but also when talking about other norms and topics such as hobbies and interests as it can be seen in Paul's interview excerpt. As noted before, especially when talking about boys, soccer and other sports were prominent topics in the discussions. Daniel for example states that soccer is more common for boys to play, whereas girls usually are more interested in sports like horseback riding. Hannah said something similar, stating that boys are into "Soccer and cars and weird stuff.". Christof also views soccer as being predominantly done by boys. He then, however, adds that girls can also play sports and are also good at doing so, but that the sports he watches are primarily played by men. It is interesting to highlight that both boys and girls participating in this research project talked about soccer as being predominantly associated with masculinity. When I was talking to Amelie about things that are typically for one gender, she mentioned the following:

> Amelie: No, and hobbies neither. No, actually, anyone can do everything. Yes, maybe there's a sport that more boys play, for example. Or maybe more girls like pink than boys like pink. But it doesn't mean that no boy likes the color pink, for example. It's also not like every boy likes soccer. For example, a female friend of mine also plays soccer.

Just like Amelie, Lisa also brought up soccer as being dominantly played by boys. However, in addition to Amelie's understanding she also takes herself as an example, arguing that she likes playing soccer and that sports can be done by everyone. In Amelie's interview excerpt, it is also essential to consider the way she talked about gender and color. As seen in Max' statement before, he also mentioned colors in the context of differences between boys and girls. This resembles research by Elsen (2018) and Ehrensaft (2011) stating that colors are also embedded in binary gender norms. The theme explored in this subchapter highlights that even though some children adhered to traditional notions of gender, there were instances where children challenged these norms, highlighting individual preferences and rejecting rigid gender expectations. Some participants expressed beliefs that everyone should have the freedom to choose their appearance and interests regardless of gender. For example, they argued that activities like playing soccer or wearing certain colors should not be restricted by gender norms. Interestingly, some children acknowledged the existence of gender norms but expressed discomfort or disagreement with them. According to theoretical views on gender performativity, gender norms are embedded in power dynamics (Butler, 1990). Challenging and bending gender norms enables individuals to disrupt power dynamics, reclaim their identity, and foster diverse gender expressions that defy traditional societal expectations (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). Children's agency, as emphasized by cultural studies and childhood studies, plays an important role in reconstructing and shifting children's understanding of gender (Corsaro, 2017).

## 6.5   Kind boys and open–minded girls

While the previous section explored how children discuss and interpret gender norms, this theme examines how children interpret animated characters in relation to gender. As previously established, gender did not emerge as a prominent factor when describing characters or explaining preferences in regard to their chosen characters. Consequently, I sought to explore how additional, underlying characteristics, not initially mentioned during visual character descriptions, intersect with children's understanding of gender. To address this, the research question "How do children interpret the characteristics of animated characters in regard to gender?" has been posed and will be further explored in this sub-chapter. When initially asking the children to describe their animated characters, their descriptions tended to focus on surface-level aspects, such as their story or physical appearance. There are several factors and decisions I made as a researcher that may have influenced the participants' responses and outcomes. By asking them to introduce me to their character, it may have implied that this included discussing the character's story to provide a more comprehensive picture. Additionally, using images of characters as visual stimuli may have prompted the children to provide visual and physical descriptions of their characters. My choice of wording could also have impacted the children's responses. Using the term "characteristics" may have overwhelmed some children, as it encompasses various aspects. Since I was not yet familiar with the children, it may have been easier for some to initially describe what they saw in the picture rather than discussing their personal opinions and preferences regarding their character.

To explore how children talk about the internal traits or characteristics of their animated characters and how they interpret them in relation to gender, I integrated the participatory activity of ranking. The task here was to rank 5 characteristics of their character from best to worst. Again, I chose the broad and comprehensive term "characteristics" to obtain a more varied and insightful response from the children. With

the thought that I would then know the children and their characters better, I hoped to gain insight into how children interpret these traits in relation to gender. In the ranking activity, the children were able to do as they pleased and to choose the characteristics they wanted. Most children opted for a numerical ranking system or the pyramid as a visual representation. In the first step, the children were asked to write down the characteristics. In a further step, I engaged them in a conversation about their ranking and their chosen characteristics. It was interesting to observe from the beginning that in this task, many more characteristics were now related to personality, behavior, or values of a character. In the dialogue after the participatory exercise, I first asked the children to read out or describe their chosen characteristics. Then I asked the children why they had arranged them in this way and if there were reasons for it. As in chapter 6.2, where I explained what children particularly like or dislike about their characters, here too, all children ranked the characteristics of their character based on their alignment with their own values and personal views. Paul for example talked about his favorite characteristics in his liked character Obelix and mentioned the following traits in position 2 and 1, which he considered to be the best in his ranking.

> Paul: In second place, I have the use of magic potions. I just find it very, very funny when you suddenly drink a magic potion, and then he can flick someone 1000 meters away with his fingers. He always gets superpowers through these magic potions. I find that quite funny, and if it existed in real life, I would like to try it. Yes, unfortunately, it doesn't exist. And at first place, I just chose sympathy because, for me, that is important with many people. You immediately notice that you can communicate well with them and also talk to them. Yes, I just find that very good and important and also very great.

> Vanessa: So, does that mean, number one is the most important for you personally?

> Paul: Exactly.

For Paul, the ranking of magic potions in second place reflects his appreciation for elements related to the story and setting of the show. He finds the concept of magical potions amusing and entertaining, enjoying the idea of gaining superpowers. On a personal level, Paul prioritizes "sympathy" as the most important attribute, placing it in first place. Him ranking it as his number one was reasoned by it, being the most important aspect and characteristics for him while simultaneously aligning with his own values. Lisa also ranked her number one for her character Olaf due to it being the most important characteristic for her personally.

> Lisa: Yes, actually, from the top five. Number one, which is generally important to me, is helpfulness. For the reason that I am helpful myself, and I think it's not just an order. […] Because when others are happy, then I'm a bit happy too.

Lisa's ranking of helpfulness as her top priority reflects her value of assisting others, viewing it even as a fundamental aspect of her own identity. Her reasoning suggests that she sees helping others as not just a duty but also a source of personal fulfillment and joy. Furthermore, Lisa believes that her own happiness is intertwined with the happiness of others. She, like Paul did, highlights her own personal values and views, when giving reason for ranking the characteristics the way she did. In analyzing the participants' responses, a similar pattern emerges to what was observed when examining their reasons for liking or disliking certain characters. Gender played a minor role in reasoning the rankings provided by the participants. Instead, their personal views and values took precedence in shaping their rankings. Interestingly, while naming and thinking about traits, one might argue that there is a subtle gender bias or adherence to gender norms present. Regarding gendered characteristics, a study by Jaggi (2017) states that children tend to define female characters by fragile characteristics while male characters are

shaped by strong and active personality traits. Furthermore, research by Birner (2016) and Kostas (2016) shows that many animated characters are interpreted by children in context of binary heteronormative gender norms and hegemonic masculinity. Many participants in this research project, however, seemed to bend these gender norms and ideas of what characteristics have to be in animated characters. Regarding characteristics in male interpreted animated characters by the children, traits like being kind, grateful or polite have been mentioned. As seen in the interview excerpts above, Paul mentioned that Obelix is sympathetic whereas Lisa stated that Olaf is helpful. Similarly, Daniel liked most about his character Bart that he is grateful. Robin liked best that his character SpongeBob is friendly. The given answers could suggest that the interpretation of traits in animated characters is more fluid compared to interpretations of gender norms. When discussing female characters in this research project, personality traits were perceived to be even more fluid. Female characters in this study were mostly described by being open-minded, adventurous and smart, whereas in previous studies, female animated characters have often been described by fragile characteristics like being scared or seeming helpless (Jaggi, 2017). When ranking characteristics in her liked character Bibi, Sarah mentioned following characteristics:

> Sarah: So, open-minded. Funny. Then brave. Then clever, and then adventurous.
>
> Vanessa: So, open–minded is number one for you?
>
> Sarah: Yes.

Hannah for example ranked her characters favorite qualities in her character Carmen Sandiego as follows: "Number one is compassionate. Then two is clever for me. Three and four: Adventurous and brave. And five: unexpected.". Like Sarah, Amelie also ranked being open-minded as her favorite characteristics in her character Doc McStuffins:

> Amelie: I think it's cool that she's so open, then that she should be a happy person. Well, I like everything, but I think it's cool that she's very open and always remains friendly, even if things might not be easy at the moment. So, I find it coolest that she's open.

Amelie's interpretation of the character reflects her appreciation for openness and positivity. According to Hamilton and Dynes (2023) and Jaggi (2017), storylines in more recent animated movies and shows often depict female characters as strong, independent women with interesting and active roles, while also showcasing egalitarian males who support the female heroines. This could have shaped the children's interpretations of characteristics in their characters regarding gender. However, some participants tended to mention traits that correspond more to binary gender norms when it came to their male characters. For example, Leon ranked the physical strength and powers of his character Gojo very highly. Christof, on the other hand, ranked it very highly that his animated character Zane sacrifices himself for others. Even though some characteristics were intertwined with heteronormative gender norms, especially when discussing male characters, it could be argued that despite being exposed to conventional gender norms, numerous children choose traits they value or identify with regardless of gender. Character traits mentioned by participants like being brave, strong or funny were still mainly inflicted with masculinity. Such traits may have been subconsciously associated with and sought out in a specific gender based on societal expectations or gender stereotypes. However, it is essential to consider that this bias may not have been intentional on the part of the participants. Rather, it might reflect the societal context in which the children were situated (Reddington, 2020). In female characters, traits such as open-mindedness or adventurousness were highly ranked, while in male characters, sympathy or helpfulness held high value. These interpretations

of gender and characteristics demonstrate a bending of rigid binary gender norms and a more fluid understanding of gender (Duvall, 2010).

To gain an even deeper and more precise insight into the interpretation of characteristics in relation to gender, I asked the participants whether the characteristics mentioned could be assigned to a specific gender or whether all genders can possess them. Robin for example stated in regard to his number one characteristic in SpongeBob of being polite that „it's for both". Robin's statement regarding his top characteristic in SpongeBob, being polite, suggests that he views this trait is not limited to one gender but according to him applicable to both genders. It indicates, however, that his interpretation of gender is embedded in the binary understanding of gender norms (Butler, 1990). When Leon was asked whether his chosen characteristic of being strong of his character Gojo, was typical for a specific gender or if not, he answered by saying „Any person, actually." By stating this, Leon seems to reject the notion that strength is inherently linked to a particular gender. Even though Leon's characteristic has been regarded in the context of binary and heteronormative gender norms as discussed in one of the previous paragraphs, it could now be argued that his statement reflects a departure from traditional binary norms that associate strength primarily with masculinity. In accordance with cultural studies and feminist and queer audience studies, this statement highlights how context-dependent his interpretations are (Corsaro, 2017; Hadley & Nenga, 2004). Transitioning from the discussion of Leon's departure from traditional binary norms regarding strength, it is evident that other participants, such as Lisa, offer an even more nuanced perspective on the interpretation of character traits across genders. Both participants talked about strength. Lisa's viewpoint delves deeper into the complexities of gendered interpretations of traits by perceiving character traits as being able to be held by all genders. Although she stated in her example that both girls and boys can be strong, she explained that this character trait has a different meaning and manifestation regarding gender.

> Lisa: No not really, because actually, anyone can have them. For example, showing strength is usually something that girls have to do, because girls have problems that are different from boys. So yes and no because it depends on how you interpret them. For example, a girl might have a different idea of showing strength. One thinks something different than boys, for example. But otherwise? No, not really. Because showing strength for girls, for example, is not always crying, because it can be bad for... Yes, maybe that could be something that doesn't fit perfectly. And showing strength for boys, for example, is 'You always have to be better than others', and if someone is better, you should say something instead of saying 'okay, you're better'.

Lisa acknowledges that while certain traits, like strength, can be embodied by individuals of any gender, societal expectations and experiences may shape the manifestation and understanding of these traits differently based on gender. However, Lisa challenges this notion by suggesting that anyone can possess these traits regardless of gender. This aligns with research by Kostas (2016), where some children, for example, held the belief that both men and women can cry; however, they do not do it in the same way. Children in Kostas' (2016) study stated that women cry more often while men cry less frequently and without tears. Although it seems that children like Lisa have a more open understanding of gender, as they do not attribute a characteristic to only one gender, it is still important to highlight that their interpretation is based on binary gender norms and thus inflected with those norms (Kostas, 2016; Bulter, 1990). In Amelie's discussion about whether her chosen characteristics are typical for a boy or a girl, the following conversation emerged:

> Vanessa: And would you say that any of these qualities are more for boys or girls, or…

Amelie: Hmm. So, hopefully, everyone should be happy. Then open. I wasn't so open before, now I'm open. But anyone can actually be even more open. I could still become more open. For example, my brother was always a bit more open, but I would say that my mom is also very open. So, it can't really be said. Then friendly, actually, everyone should be friendly. Always be nice. And hardworking. It totally depends on the person. If I take the example of school, for example. There's me, a person who is very hardworking in school and always takes everything very seriously, but then there might be a girl who doesn't take school so seriously. And then there's a boy who takes school very seriously. And then there's a boy who doesn't take anything seriously about school. Seriousness or helpfulness can also vary from person to person. And I think it also depends on a person's mood because if you're really, really in a bad mood, then you can't be friendly. And if you've just had a bad day or just don't want to do that one task, then maybe you can't be hardworking. And because you have so much on your plate, you can't be helpful, etc.

Amelie challenges the idea of certain qualities being inherently tied to a specific gender. She argues that qualities such as openness, friendliness, and hard work should not be gendered but rather universal traits that everyone should aspire to embody. By highlighting examples from her own family, where both her brother and mother exhibit traits typically associated with openness, she undermines the idea of gender-specific traits. She also illustrates this variability with examples from school, where students exhibit different levels of seriousness and helpfulness regardless of their gender. However, it is also interesting to note that her statement is shaped by binary gender norms. First, she says that everyone can have everything, but then she seems to associate openness with being typical in boys or hardworking at school being typical for girls, after which she then brings examples that bend these norms.

Within the scope of this research project, it is interesting to note that for children, it seems easier to say that anyone can have certain appearances and hobbies. In contrast, traits were more likely to be associated with a specific gender. When I talked with Christof about his character Zane's trait of sacrificing himself for others, he stated following:

Vanessa: And would you say that sacrificing for everyone or helping each other is specifically for boys or also for girls, or...

Christof: Hmm, difficult. In Ninjago, only the boys do it, or in some series, but I'm not sure. So maybe for both. But actually, more for boys. Yes, because they want to protect, so to speak.

Vanessa: That means, you would say that boys are more often protectors?

Christof: Yes, I would say so.

Christof's response reflects traditional gender roles and norms by stating that boys or men usually take on the role of sacrificing themselves or protecting others. However, it is also interesting to observe that Christof hesitated for a moment saying „So maybe for both", implying that it might also be possible for men and women to be protectors. He then goes back and reinforces the binary gender norms by finally stating that boys are more often protectors. However, it is not entirely clear whether he is saying this in relation to male roles in movies, as he also mentioned this earlier in reference to the TV series Ninjago, or if he was referring to general gender norms. In Hannah's interview when talking about being compassionate, she also seemed to use binary gender norms to interpret characteristics in her character Carmen Sandiego.

Vanessa: Would you say that these qualities are typically girl or typically boy?

Hannah: Compassionate is typically girl.

Vanessa: Why?

Hannah: Because boys are not compassionate.

Vanessa: Why do you think that?

Hannah: Because they always annoy. And when they annoy, then we get annoyed. And if they were compassionate, then they would also annoy themselves. […]

In this interaction, Hannah's response reflects a belief in binary and traditional gender norms regarding compassion. She suggests that compassion is typically associated with girls, while implying that boys are not compassionate. This perspective reinforces the idea that certain traits are inherently linked to specific genders, perpetuating a binary view of gender roles (Elsen, 2018). Hannah also seems to associate compassion with the absence of annoyance, suggesting that boys, by their nature, are prone to annoying behaviors. Interestingly, when I asked her if any of her other ranked characteristics like being clever, adventurous, brave or unexpected are more common in a gender, she answered as followed:

Vanessa: And for the other qualities: would you say that there's anything typically girl or typically boy?

Hannah: No.

Hannah's response to my follow-up question regarding other qualities further highlights the complexity of her interpretation of characteristics and gender norms. While she firmly associates compassion with girls and thus boys with a lack of compassion, she hesitates to apply similar gendered associations to other qualities like being clever, adventurous, brave, or unexpected. Hannah seems to navigate and interpret some characteristics in regard to binary gender norms, whereas they are not so present in the interpretation of other characteristics (Reddington, 2020; Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007). The analysis and interpretations of the participants' arguments throughout the previous sections illustrate the nuanced understanding children have of characteristics in regard to gender, balancing between flexibility and adherence to binary gender norms. Therefore, it can be emphasized that gender norms, in accordance with theoretical views of gender performativity, cultural studies and social constructionism, play an important role in children's interpretation of animated characters. Thus, I posed a sub-research question that explores in more detail how children navigate such norms when interpreting animated characters and media. This question will be discussed in the following section.

## 6.6 "Not every girl always wears a dress": Navigating gender norms in animated characters

After exploring how children interpret characteristics in their animated characters in regard to gender, I was interested in how children navigate gender norms when interpreting animated characters. I thus posed the research question "How do children navigate gender norms through their interpretations of animated characters?". As elaborated before, gender norms play an essential role in children's understanding of gender. This section will explore how children navigate gender norms in their interpretations of animated characters. As mentioned before, during the interview, we had pictures of the characters as visual stimuli. Thus, in regard to examining how children interpret their character's gender, I asked them a separate question, directed at their chosen characters. These questions revolved around whether one can assign a gender to the characters or if the characteristics mentioned by the participants match those of men and women.

Nico for example talked about non-human characters: Tom, a cat, and Jerry, a mouse. The following discussion emerged when I asked if he could talk about the gender of his characters.

> Vanessa: Okay. For example, going back to Tom and Jerry, would you say you can tell?
>
> Nico: Not really. It's difficult. I assume the cat is a boy. And for the mouse... Difficult. I think I would even say it's a girl.
>
> Vanessa: And why do you think that?
>
> Nico: For the cat, I think you can tell. Because it's lively. I don't know how to say it. Maybe more athletic. No, but not really. Maybe lively. And the mouse is not really. It's calm.
>
> Vanessa: So, you can tell in terms of personality?
>
> Nico: Yes.
>
> Vanessa: Can you see that from their appearance?
>
> Nico: Not really.

Nico expressed the view that gender cannot be defined solely by looks. Instead, according to Nico, it is better described by actions and character traits, navigating binary gender norms and thus implying that being athletic is more common in boys whereas being calm is more common in girls. Daniel also interprets his characters' gender, Goofy and Bart, as boys, arguing that their behavior of not following rules is a trait that is more common in boys. Behavior is also a crucial gender-related aspect. Elsen (2017) argues that, on one hand, gender norms are conveyed through certain behaviors. On the other hand, the behavior itself can be part of constructing gender. According to Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, behaviors create meaning in the context of performing gender. Thus, children can either internalize or act out behaviors conforming or non-conforming to gender norms (Ehrensaft, 2011). Bartholomaeus (2015) argues that non-normative behavior or behavior that challenges gender norms can be difficult for children to understand. Children tend to associate gender with behavior that is aligned with normative gender expectations when they make sense of gender. Previous studies by Hamilton and Dynes (2023) on animated characters underline these outcomes, showing that children use behavior as well as characteristics as cues when interpreting a character's gender.

Whereas some participants navigated gender norms in terms of personality and behavior when interpreting animated characters, it is also worth mentioning that a number of participants used norms in regard to looks or physical appearance. Leon for example interpreted his characters' gender, Gojo and Yuji, as male in regard to physical gender norms.

> Vanessa: And if you look at Gojo and Yuji now. How would you describe their gender?
>
> Leon: Both are male.
>
> Vanessa: Okay, and for you, are they typical men? Like how you imagine a man in terms of characteristics and appearance?
>
> Leon: Yes.
>
> Vanessa: Why?
>
> Leon: Yes, well. Among other things, because of the short hair and the general appearance.
>
> Vanessa: Also, in terms of characteristics, or just in terms of appearance?

Leon: Only appearance.

When Leon was asked if he would describe his characters as typical men, Leon affirms that both characters are male and align with his perception of what a man should look like. He attributes this perception primarily to their physical appearance, particularly their short hair and general appearance. His emphasis on appearance rather than personality traits implies that he may not consider internal qualities or behaviors when defining masculinity or that he seems to navigate gender norms in regard to internal characteristics differently. Paul for example also talked about appearances in his chosen characters, Hello Kitty and Obelix. He stated that Hello Kitty seems more like a girl to him, whereas Obelix is a man. He argued his interpretations based on the physique and looks of his characters:

> Vanessa: If you now look at Hello Kitty and Obelix, would you say that they are more like girls or more like boys, or...
>
> Paul: So, I would say that Hello Kitty reminds me more of a girl. Because of the clothing, for example. But men or boys can wear that too. And Obelix reminds me more of a man. I think in terms of physique or body shape, and also the big nose. Maybe the broad arms. So, more in terms of the body.

Paul responded by attributing feminine characteristics to Hello Kitty and masculine characteristics to Obelix. He associated Hello Kitty with femininity primarily based on her clothing, suggesting that the clothing typically aligns with female gender norms. Conversely, Paul views Obelix as more masculine, citing physical attributes such as physique, body shape, the size of the nose, and broad arms. These physical characteristics, according to Paul, seem to align with traditional norms of masculinity. However, he acknowledged that men or boys can also wear Hello Kitty's clothing, indicating an awareness of gender fluidity. This fluidity became more prominent when I asked him whether Hello Kitty and Obelix are typical girls and boys.

> Vanessa: And if you look at Obelix and Hello Kitty now, would you say that they are a typical man or a typical girl for you?
>
> Paul: No, they can all be different too. Obelix has a broader physique. But there are also men who have a slim physique. Or even Hello Kitty. She is now, for example, a cat. A bit human but more like a cat. But it's not really typical. Obelix is not really the typical man, I think. Hello Kitty is also not the typical woman.

As mentioned before, Paul acknowledged that physical attributes, such as Obelix's broader physique, may align with traditional notions of masculinity. However, he emphasizes that individuals can deviate from these stereotypes, noting that some men may have a slimmer physique. Similarly, he suggests that Hello Kitty's identity as a cat blurs traditional gender distinctions, as she embodies characteristics of both humans and cats. Thus, Paul concluded that neither Obelix nor Hello Kitty fit neatly into typical gender categories. Even though gender norms were present when he made sense of his characters, they also seemed to be more fluid.

When Hannah talks about her favorite character, a spy called Carmen Sandiego, she interprets that she is more like a girl due to her equipment and looks.

> Hannah: Yes, she is more of a girl. Because of her equipment. For example, she has a USB stick that looks like a lipstick. She then extends it and can plug it in. And the data is immediately delivered to the player. It can also turn off the video cameras and delete everything if needed. And she's completely red. For example, her makeup mirror is a camera. [...] She has equipment that is more for girls. But she's not girly. And not pink or rose either.

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According to studies conducted by Hamilton and Dynes (2023) and Martínez-García and Fernández–García (2021), physical attributes of individuals, and thus also animated characters, can be associated with femininity. Butler (1990) suggests that children's gender expression is, in part, defined by and made recognizable through symbolic objects like clothing and accessories. Thus, objects and their meanings are socio-culturally constructed. Some objects like dresses for example are therefore embedded in binary gender norms and thus associated with a specific gender. Some children therefore aim at conforming to the norm and displaying their association with a membership by wearing and using certain objects (Butler, 1990; Elsen, 2018; Hamilton & Dynes, 2023; Osgood & Giugni, 2015). Hence, femininity is often linked to the discourse of physical beauty. The emphasis on such heightened femininity contributes to the construction and perpetuation of heterosexual discourses (Blaise, 2005). Despite the traditional and conforming gender norms that are embedded in Hannah's description of the spy as being like a girl, it is interesting to note her remark at the end of the interview excerpt. She stated that even though Carmen seems like a girl, Hannah does not consider her to be girly, due to her not wearing pink clothing. Thus, Hannah seems to have an awareness of gender norms and what is considered appropriate for girls and what is not. Hamilton and Dynes (2023) argue that "girly" is a social construct that places children, especially girls, under significant pressure to conform to gender-typed expectations. They assert that this social construct exerts considerable pressure on children, particularly girls, compelling them to adhere to stereotypical gender expectations. This pressure to conform to societal norms regarding femininity can influence various aspects of girls' lives, including their behavior, appearance, and interests (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023).

Some children, like Robin for example, used the visual stimuli and images of their characters when interpreting their gender. Robin chose Spongebob Squarepants as a character he likes and Squidward as a character he does not like. When asked about if he had already heard the term gender before and what this word means for him, he pointed at the images of his characters, stating: "Well, you can't see it with these two. He [Squidward] is not wearing pants.". Ehrensaft (2011) and Butler (1990) illustrate that biological gender in the forms of hormones or genitalia remains a prevalent aspect of defining gender in Western societies. However, they argue that this perspective is not accurate, as gender is performed and constructed by various components, such as gender identity. Children who do not conform with their physical gender attributes thus do not conform with gender norms (Ehrensaft, 2011; Butler, 1990). It is interesting to note that Robin talked about gender in a non-human character while assigning it to external genitalia. Earlier studies have also highlighted the role of appearance as well as the rigid gendered expectations children often hold regarding appearance (Hamilton & Dynes, 2023). Birner's research (2016) embedded in Butler's (2004) theory of recognizability found that children struggle to recognize non-conforming gender performances. Gender performances of masculinity and femininity are recognized as normative ideals within dominant discourses. As individuals aim at these ideal norms, non-conforming aspects or individuals can be the reason why some children find it difficult to explore non-conformativity (Butler, 2004). Statements like Robin's highlight the importance of gender conforming appearances in the process of making sense of gender.

It is also interesting to discuss how some participants consciously navigated gender norms when discussing their animated characters. Sarah for example interpreted her chosen animated characters Bibi and King Magnifico in terms of gender norms that can be seen in movies.

> Sarah: Yes, actually, he is a typical man. Especially his behavior. I think that's a general trend in all movies. Men are portrayed as really 'manly,' strong, as it has always been said. That men are stronger than women. And I think that has still been portrayed in movies.

In Sarah's response, she asserts that King Magnifico is a typical representation of a man, particularly in terms of behavior. She suggests that this portrayal aligns with a pervasive trend in movies, where men are depicted as "manly" and strong. Her interpretation reflects a critical perspective on gender representation in media, highlighting the perpetuation of traditional gender norms and expectations. I then asked Sarah if she thinks that Bibi is a typical girl, where she answered:

> Sarah: If you think about what you see in other movies, Bibi is not that typical girl. She's a bit different, yeah. I don't know how to describe it well, but she's not that very, very typical girl, so to speak. I just find her well-portrayed. I don't see her as one of those girls who are too flashy, but rather nice, polite, and helpful, not arrogant or anything.

> Vanessa: You said she's not that very typical girl. How are typical girls portrayed in movies or series?

> Sarah: In movies and series, I find that they gossip about others all the time. And they're only nice to their own group of friends and unfriendly to others. Like, 'You're stupid.' And also, in terms of what they wear in series, they usually have dresses, and Bibi wears shirts and pants. I like that, not every girl always wears a dress.

Sarah's statements provide insight into the portrayal of gender in movies and series, highlighting stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity. Whereas King Magnifico is interpreted as a typical man due to him conforming to binary gender norms portrayed in movies, Sarah contrasts Bibi's character with stereotypical portrayals of girls, noting her deviation from the norm due to her being "nice, polite, and helpful" rather than flashy or arrogant. Similarly, a conversation with Amelie gave insight into how she navigated gender norms in regard to her character Doc McStuffins which she interpreted as being a girl, due to her being addressed with female pronouns.

> Vanessa: I have a quick question about Doc McStuffins again. You mentioned earlier that you would see her more as a woman or a girl. Would you say that she is a typical girl?

> Amelie: I think there's no stereotype for girls. Because a girl can also have a completely different job, right? She can wear not only pink or black but also a green shirt. And a girl can also have a different vocation. She can also be a cook or a pilot. So, it depends!

> Vanessa: Because you said, for you, it doesn't exist. Do you believe that it still exists somehow in the world?

> Amelie: Yes. So, some still say that pink is more for girls and purple and blue are more for boys. Surely, as a baby or a little girl, I only wanted to wear pink. And maybe there are still stereotypes in certain things, for example, a pink hairband. I haven't seen that often or never on boys. That's why I might still associate it more with girls or certain things like a pink hairband, or I've simply never seen it on boys, or never. And that's why I might still associate it more with something, but not really.

Amelie challenges the notion of a "typical girl" by rejecting the idea of stereotypes associated with gender. She emphasizes that girls can have diverse interests, occupations, and clothing preferences, breaking away from traditional gender norms. Despite her seeming to have a more fluid understanding of gender norms, she also acknowledges that norms may still persist in society, such as the association of color with a gender. This pattern, where gender norms were present and acknowledged but also challenged and bent, emerged through the analysis and interpretations of the children in this research project. Especially when navigating gender norms in the interpretation of animated characters, the existing power dynamics and social context become visible. The existing binary gender norms in Austrian society shape how children navigate gender in

animated characters. According to poststructuralist theory and gender performativity, gender is dynamic, continuously shaped by discourses and practices, allowing children to transform and perform gender (Bartholomaeus & Senkevics, 2015; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). However, when children challenge and navigate these norms demonstrates the importance of their own agency in this context, which then shapes further interpretations of animated characters in the media (Cavalcantea et al., 2017).

## 6.7   Chapter summary

The findings of this research project give an insight into the complexity of animated characters as well as how children perceive and understand them in terms of gender. Children's understanding of characters is entangled with gender norms, gendered characteristics, language and current societal debates. Whereas in some situations gender has been rather absent in children's interpretation of characters like when describing their characters in terms of appearance or when giving reasons for liking or disliking characters, gender norms were present when interpreting their characters in terms of personality traits or gender. Numerous aspects of a character played a crucial part in the sense-making of animated characters such as characteristics or the context of a character. The interpretations of animated characters regarding gender were often shaped by binary gender norms. While most participants demonstrate familiarity with gender norms, societal shifts and exposure to diverse gender frameworks suggest that they perceive gender as existing along a spectrum, recognizing diverse expressions of femininity and masculinity. Additionally, children's understanding was also shaped by discourses, language and current societal debates in Austria on gender. Therefore, this research project is in line with previous studies and the established theoretical framework, providing valuable insights into the intertwining of gender and animated characters.

# 7 Conclusion

The overarching aim of this study was to explore how children make sense of animated characters in terms of gender. To achieve this goal, the research question "How do children make sense of animated characters in terms of gender?" was posed. To explore the topic in more depth, two sub-questions were formulated. The first sub-question focused on characteristics in animated characters and was phrased as follows: "How do children interpret the characteristics of animated characters related to gender?". The second sub-question gender norm and how children navigate the. Thus the question was "How do children navigate gender norms through their interpretations of animated characters?". For exploring these research questions, qualitative research has been designed, to gain insight into this complex social phenomenon. This research was embedded in the theoretical perspectives of childhood studies, gender studies and media studies and acknowledged essential concepts such as social constructionism, children's agency, gender performativity and the field of feminist and queer audience studies. 11 individual visual stimuli interviews have been conducted with participants between the ages of 10 and 13. The semi-structured interviews included the participatory tools of ranking and drawing exercises. During these interviews the children and I talked about animated characters they like and dislike which they were able to choose themselves. This chapter offers a summary and concluding reflections on how children interpret and talk about animated characters in media from their perspective while also connecting these to understandings of gender and gender norms. In the subsequent section, I will summarize the findings in regard to the posed research questions. Following this, I will discuss the limitations of the study and propose recommendations for future research.

## 7.1 Research findings

Children's understanding of gender is socially constructed and therefore embedded and shaped by a specific surrounding, both locally and globally, as highlighted in the theoretical perspective of social constructionism (James & Prout, 2015). Thus, making meaning and interpreting media is embedded in such constructs and contexts (Corsaro, 2017). In regard to the overarching main research question on how children make sense of animated characters in terms of gender, the findings highlight the complexity of this process and how it is embedded in a cultural context. The analysis also shows that the interpretation of animated characters is connected with gender. Although, it is crucial to note that the presence of gender varies depending on the context. When the participants were asked to give an introduction to their chosen animated characters and when discussing reasons for liking or disliking characters, gender was not explicitly mentioned. However, in context of the sense making of animated characters and their characteristics, gender seemed to be more present. This was underlined using Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity which states that gender is produced in a specific social context. This social context also includes power structures like gender norms (Kelly-Ware, 2016) which have also been prominent in children's discourses on gender. Gender in terms of binary gender norms and expectations however was present when discussing characteristics in animated characters in more detail. Statements about looks, appearance, behavior as well as personality traits were often embedded in binary gender norms. In Austrian society, binary gender norms of what it means to be male or female are still present (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019). Due to children's interpretation of media and production of gender through language and linguistic acts (Mendes & Carter, 2008; Butler, 1990), their understandings of gender in animated characters were also related to

societal discussions. Current debates concerning gender neutral language as well as inclusion and gender diversity can be visible in the children's understanding. These findings highlight the importance of language in the children's lives as well as their interpretation of animated characters and gender.

The first sub-research question explored the characteristics in animated characters in relation to gender in more detail. As mentioned before, gender was present in children's discussions on characteristics in the form of gender norms. It can be noted that the term characteristics is a broad term encompassing various aspects and types of characteristics. Children seem to navigate this term differently depending on the context. When talking about overall descriptions of their selected characters, physical looks as well as the story of a character were important. When talking about preferred characteristics in animated characters, personality traits and internal attributes were highlighted. As described before, gender was not uniformly present in all discussions; for instance, when participants described pictures of their characters or discussed their roles, gender was not explicitly mentioned by any of them. However, in other conversations, particularly those regarding personality traits, gender played a more prominent role. It appears that the children involved in this study exhibited a fluid understanding of gender in terms of appearance, such as hairstyles, and interests, like soccer. Many participants expressed the belief that anyone can wear anything or enjoy any activity. Nevertheless, discussions about behaviors and personality traits often reflected the influence of binary gender norms, with statements suggesting that girls are more compassionate while boys are often seen as protectors. It is however also important to highlight that in comparison to previous research by Hamilton and Dynes (2023), Birner (2016) and Kostas (2016), children participating in this research also seem to describe their characters personality traits with a more fluid understanding of gender, stating that female characters have often been valued by the participants for being open minded and adventurous, whereas male characters have been described as being kind and polite. Thus, social norms, as highlighted by social constructionism, childhood studies and gender performativity, shape how children make sense of their reality and gender. As shown throughout the analysis, the presence of binary logics are often still implicitly present and underpinning the participants' sense-making, even when children promote more fluid and inclusive stances on gender stating for example that everyone can be everything.

Due to the role of social and gender norms in shaping children's understanding of gender, the second sub-question explored how children navigate these gender norms. The discussions and explorations within this research offer valuable perspectives on children's agency and their navigation of these gender norms in which their understanding and interpretation of animated characters is embedded in. Interpretations of animated characters with regard to gender often reflected binary gender norms, of what it means to be a woman or girl or a man or boy. Children navigated gender norms in regard to the societal and cultural context as well as personal views. This process of navigation seemed to be complex, being shaped by many aspects of the character as well as the children's surroundings. Although many participants navigated binary gender norms, some participants seemed to have a more fluid understanding of gender norms, acknowledging diverse expressions of femininity and masculinity. It is also crucial to highlight that in some aspects of the interpretation of animated characters, the navigation of gender norms seemed to be easier for the children than in other aspects, where children seemed to bend the traditional binary gender norms more often or more easily for example when talking about hairstyles. However, children may still find it challenging to deviate from traditional gender norms due to fear of rejection. The theoretical framework of

poststructuralism and gender performativity suggests that gender is dynamic and continuously constructed through interactions with societal discourses and practices. While children may have agency in reshaping gender norms, their actions often occur within the confines of a binary gender framework. Exposure to equal representations of gender in media may contribute to gender-equalizing impacts, influencing perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Thus, it's crucial to recognize that societal norms related to gender are constructed and performed, in part influenced by how animated characters are designed and portrayed.

## 7.2 Strengths and limitations

Spending a year on designing, implementing, conducting research and analyzing data, taught me a lot about research processes, especially in regard to research with children. During this time, I often reflected on my research journey, which gave me insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the research project I have conducted. Both the strengths and limitations of this research shaped the process and made the research what it was. In some cases, the two are also connected to each other. Therefore, I'll discuss these limitations and strengths together in this chapter.

In my previous studies, my background in media studies provided a valuable perspective that informed my research. I was fortunate to easily find willing participants, and the collaboration between them, the gatekeepers, and myself was highly productive, positively shaping the research process. However, due to constraints in time and budget, I was only able to meet with the participants once for data collection. It is possible that spending more time with them could have yielded different outcomes. Additionally, conducting fieldwork in Austria for a project that institutionally took place in Norway posed some logistical challenges, particularly in coordinating study-related meetings. Despite these obstacles, I adapted and restructured the research process as needed, which ultimately proved beneficial and taught me valuable lessons about research methodologies. Although I initially planned to involve children aged 8-13, I ended up working with a slightly narrower age range of 10-13, resulting in a more homogeneous participant group. Nonetheless, I strived to amplify the voices of these children in a broad topic like gender and media, where their perspectives are often overlooked. While it was my first time conducting research and for some participants, their first experience with research participation, I was able to create a comfortable and open environment for discussion. Reflecting on the data collection process, I recognize that I could have asked more probing follow-up questions, particularly regarding statements that seemed clear to me but may have been influenced by specific cultural or societal contexts unfamiliar to outsiders, like current Austrian debates on gender and language. Looking ahead, this research experience has provided valuable insights into my strengths and weaknesses as both a person and a researcher. I now have a clearer understanding of areas for improvement and adjustments to consider in future research endeavors. In the following section, I will not only outline potential enhancements for my own research practices but also offer recommendations for future studies exploring the intricate interplay of gender, animation, and children's interpretations.

## 7.3 Notes and recommendations for future research

To further advance research on children's interpretation of animated characters in relation to gender, it is crucial to delve deeper into various aspects of the topic. Longitudinal studies would enable researchers to track changes in societal and gender

norms over time and how they change and shape children's understanding of gender in animated characters. By observing how these interpretations evolve as children grow older, researchers can gain valuable insights into the dynamic and complex nature of gender interpretation. Even though I brought together the fields of gender studies, childhood studies and media studies, which has enabled me to explore this topic while acknowledging aspects, important to these perspectives, embracing interdisciplinary approaches that draw from even more research fields than in this study could offer a more deeper understanding of the aspects being connected and intertwined with children's interpretations. Conducting research in diverse cultural contexts and even exploring cross-cultural comparisons could shed light on how different cultural norms and values influence children's sense making of animated characters in gender. Due to this study being embedded in a rather homogeneous cultural and societal context, involving a more heterogeneous group of children, from different areas and socioeconomic backgrounds might offer different outcomes and perspectives. Additionally, by exploring interactions between children or across generations around media content for example through more long-term ethnographic approaches, researchers could study the role of media content such as animation in everyday life. Finally, adopting a more participatory approach by involving children in various stages of the research process such as co-designing research questions and interpreting findings, and disseminating results could empower them as active contributors and ensure that their perspectives are even more central to the research. By engaging children as partners in research, researchers can gain deeper insights into their experiences and foster more meaningful and impactful research outcomes while also acknowledging their agency and voices. Thus, the approach of this research project can serve as a good starting point for further participatory research as well as the incorporation of additional theoretical perspectives.

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# Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Sikt approval

**Appendix 2:** Information letter to parents/guardians (English)

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## Appendix 1: Sikt approval

**◆ Sikt**

# Assessment of processing of personal data

| **Reference number** | **Assessment type** | **Date** |
|---|---|---|
| 236118 | Standard | 10.08.2023 |

**Title**
Master's thesis "Children's Interpretation of Animated Characters in Media"

**Institution responsible for the project**
Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet / Fakultet for samfunns- og utdanningsvitenskap (SU) / Institutt for pedagogikk og livslang læring

**Project leader**
Linn C. Lorgen

**Student**
Vanessa Holzeis

**Project period**
30.06.2023 - 15.05.2024

**Categories of personal data**
General

**Legal basis**
Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)

The processing of personal data is lawful, so long as it is carried out as stated in the notification form. The legal basis is valid until 15.05.2024.

Notification Form ⬈

**Comment**
ABOUT OUR ASSESSMENT
Data Protection Services has an agreement with the institution where you are a student or a researcher. As part of this agreement, we provide guidance so that the processing of personal data in your project is lawful and complies with data protection legislation. We have now assessed that you have legal basis to process the personal data.

PARENTAL CONSENT
The project will gain consent from the parent for the processing of personal data about the children.

FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES
You must store, send and secure the collected data in accordance with your institution's guidelines. This means that you must use data processors (and the like) that your institution has an agreement with (i.e. cloud storage, online survey, and video conferencing providers).

Our assessment presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data.

NOTIFY CHANGES
If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project, it may be necessary to notify us. This is done by updating the information registered in the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified. Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes: https://sikt.no/en/notify-changes-notification-form

FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT
We will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the project!

## Appendix 2: Information letter to parents/guardians (English)

My name is Vanessa Holzeis and I am a master's student in Childhood Studies at NTNU in Trondheim, Norway. I am currently working on a research project about children and their interpretations of animated characters in media. With the help of this research I want to find out more about children's understanding of animated characters especially in relation to gender, how they interpret gender and how certain understandings of characters are connected to societal gender norms.

I am therefore looking for participants. Children between the ages of 8 and 13 can contribute to this research project by voluntarily agreeing to being part of an interview. The interview will take place in October and will involve also other participatory methods like drawing,. The exact date and location will be arranged individually with the parents and the children themselves. The interview therefore can be conducted either at the children's home or at another place where the child feels comfortable (eg. group rooms,...). The duration of the interview will be approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Well in advance to the interview, the parents and the children will be contacted by me to get more information about the interview. In the center of the research will be the children and their participation and contribution: The children are therefore asked to bring one to two pictures of animated characters they like, and one to two pictures of characters they dislike to the interview. These characters should be chosen by the children and their pictures should be brought to the interview site, either as physical copies (printed out, picture, in a book,...) or as digital copies which can be sent to me beforehand.

Participating in this research project is completely voluntary. Children who want to be part of the interview as well as their parents must have given consent, both by signing a letter of consent as well as a verbally given consent. The participants can withdraw at any time, which will lead to the immediate deletion of all the data that has been collected in regard to the withdrawing child. This data includes audio recordings during the interview, written notes as well as information that was used for contacting the parents and the children. For children who complete the interview and agree to be part of the research project, all the personal data collected in regard to them will be deleted once the research project is over (approximately June 2024). All the data material that will be collected during this research will be anonymized and will only be used for my master's thesis.

If there are any questions about the project, I can be contacted by email: vanessa@holzeis.net or by phone: +436804012606. The Supervisor for the master's thesis at NTNU in Trondheim, Linn C. Lorgen, can also be contacted by email: linn.c.lorgen@ntnu.no.


Kind regards,

Vanessa Holzeis

## Appendix 3: Information letter to parents/guardians (German)

Mein Name ist Vanessa Holzeis und ich bin Studentin im Master-Programm Childhood Studies an der NTNU in Trondheim, Norwegen. Zurzeit arbeite ich an einem Forschungsprojekt über Kinder und deren Interpretation von Animationscharakteren in den Medien. Durch meine Forschung möchte ich mehr über das Verständnis von Animationscharakteren vor allem in Betracht zu Gender, wie Gender interpretiert wird und wie bestimmte Interpretationen in Beziehung zu Geschlechternormen stehen, herausfinden.

Daher bin ich auf der Suche nach Teilnehmer*innen. Kinder im Alter von 8 bis 13 Jahren können zu diesem Forschungsprojekt beitragen, indem sie freiwillig zustimmen, Teil eines Interviews zu sein. Das Interview, das außerdem mit anderen Methoden wie zum Beispiel Zeichnen verbunden wird, findet im Oktober statt. Das genaue Datum sowie der Ort werden individuell mit den Eltern / Erziehungsberechtigten und den Kindern ausgemacht. Das Interview kann daher entweder bei den Kindern zuhause oder an einem anderen Ort (z.B. externe Gruppenräume,...) durchgeführt werden. Die Dauer des Interviews beträgt etwa 60 bis 90 Minuten.

Rechtzeitig vor dem Interview werden die Eltern / Erziehungsberechtigten und die Kinder von mir bezüglich des Interviews und zusätzlichen Informationen kontaktiert. Im Mittelpunkt meiner Forschung stehen die Kinder sowie deren Beiträge: Die Kinder werden daher gebeten, ein bis zwei Bilder von Animationscharakteren, die sie mögen und ein bis zwei Bilder von Animationscharakteren, die sie nicht mögen, zum Interview mitzubringen. Diese Charaktere sollen von den Kindern ausgewählt werden und entweder in physischer Form (ausgedrucktes Bild, Foto,...) oder als digitale Kopie, die im Vorhinein an mich gesendet wird, zum Interview mitgenommen werden.

Die Teilnahme an diesem Forschungsprojekt ist in jeder Hinsicht freiwillig. Kinder, die Teil sein und interviewt werden wollen, sowie deren Erziehungsberechtigte müssen zustimmen; einerseits durch das Unterschreiben einer schriftlichen Einwilligung, andererseits auch durch eine mündliche Zustimmung. Teilnehmende können jederzeit von der Forschung austreten, was zur sofortigen Löschung aller Daten, die das Kind betreffen, führt. Diese Daten beinhalten Stimmaufnahmen während des Interviews, Notizen sowie auch Informationen, die zum Kontaktieren der Betroffenen verwendet wurden. Für die Daten von Kindern, die bis zum Ende des Projekts an der Teilnahme zustimmen, wird die Löschung nach Ende dieses Projekts durchgeführt (was voraussichtlich Juni 2024 sein wird). Alle Daten und Materialien, die während der Forschung gesammelt werden, werden anonymisiert und nur für diese Masterarbeit verwendet.

Bei Fragen bezüglich des Projekts können Sie mich per Email unter vanessa@holzeis.net oder telefonisch unter +436804012606 kontaktieren. Die Betreuerin der Masterarbeit an der NTNU - Linn C. Lorgen - kann auch per Email unter linn.c.lorgen@ntnu.no kontaktiert werden.


Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

Vanessa Holzeis

## Appendix 4: Information letter to participants/consent form (English)

### Are you interested in taking part in the research project
### *"Children's Interpretation of Animated Characters in Media"*?

My name is Vanessa Holzeis and I am a master's student in Childhood Studies at NTNU in Trondheim, Norway. I am working on a research project about children and their understanding of animated characters in media like movies, games or tv shows. The aspect of gender is especially interesting for me in the research for my master's thesis.

I am therefore looking for children between the ages of 8 and 13 who want to be part of my research. If you want to partake in the research, you then will be interviewed. An interview is a conversation between you and me where we will talk about animated characters. We will also have some activities in between our conversation like drawing or ranking, where you will put characteristics in an order. The exact date and location will be arranged individually with you and your parents. The interview therefore can be conducted either at your home or at another place (eg. group rooms,...). The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes and will take place in October.

Before the actual meeting, you and your parents will get more information about the interview. Your understanding and opinions will be the center of the research. I therefore ask you to bring one to two pictures of animated characters you like, and one to two pictures of characters you dislike to the interview. You yourself should choose the characters you want to talk about and the character's pictures should be brought to the interview site. You can either bring them as physical copies (printed out, picture, in a book,...) or as digital copies which can be sent to me beforehand.

Participating in this research project is completely voluntary. You yourself decide if you want to be part of the research or not. For participating, I need your as well as your parent's written consent. Before our interview I will also ask you, if you still want to participate. If you don't want to participate anymore, you can withdraw at any time without having to give any reason to why.

During our interview I will collect some data like audio recordings or notes, for me to remember what you said. If you withdraw from the research all your data will be deleted immediately. If you complete the interview and still want to be part of the research until the end, your data will also be deleted after I finish my project (approximately June 2024). All the data material that will be collected during this research will be anonymized - so that no one knows that this is about you - and will only be used for my master's thesis. If you are interested in the information that I collected about you, you have the right to see it. You also have the right to have data about you deleted or corrected, if it is wrong. You can also get a copy of your information from me. If you think that I treated your data in a wrong way, you can complain to the The Norwegian Data Protection Authority. All these steps you can take are for your own safety and the safety concerning information about you.

If you want to participate in the research project or if you have any questions about the project, I can be contacted by email: vanessa@holzeis.net or by phone: +436804012606. The Supervisor for the master's thesis at NTNU in Trondheim, Linn C. Lorgen, can also be contacted by email: linn.c.lorgen@ntnu.no. If you have questions about the protection of your data you can also contact SIKT via email personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by phone: +47 73 98 40 40.

Kind regards,
Vanessa Holzeis

# Consent form

I have received and understood information about the master project on the interpretations of animated characters and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

☐ to participate in an interview

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end of the project.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
(Child's name and signature)

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
(Parent's signature and date)

## Appendix 5: Information letter to participants/consent form (German)

### Hast du Interesse bei dem Forschungsprojekt
### *"Interpretationen von Animationscharakteren in den Medien"* mitzumachen?

Mein Name ist Vanessa Holzeis und ich bin Studentin im Master-Programm Childhood Studies an der NTNU in Trondheim, Norwegen. Zurzeit arbeite ich an einem Forschungsprojekt über Kinder und deren Verständnis von Animationscharakteren in den Medien wie Filmen, Serien oder Videospielen. Vor allem Gender und die Verbindung zu den Charakteren interessieren mich bei meiner Masterarbeit.

Daher bin ich auf der Suche nach Kindern im Alter von 8 bis 13 Jahren, die bei meiner Forschung mitmachen wollen. Wenn du mitmachen willst, wirst du interviewt. Ein Interview ist ein Gespräch zwischen dir und mir, bei dem wir über verschiedene Charaktere sprechen werden. Neben dem Gespräch wirst du auch andere kleine Aufgaben bekommen, wie zum Beispiel etwas zu zeichnen. Das Interview, das außerdem mit anderen Methoden wie Zeichnen verbunden wird, wird im Oktober stattfinden. Das genaue Datum sowie der Ort werden individuell mit dir und deinen Eltern ausgemacht. Das Interview kann daher bei dir zuhause oder an einem anderen Ort (z.B. Gruppenräume,...) durchgeführt werden. Die Dauer des Interviews beträgt etwa 60 bis 90 Minuten und wird im Oktober stattfinden.

Rechtzeitig vor dem Interview erhalten du und deine Eltern noch weitere Informationen über das Interview von mir. Deine Meinung steht im Mittelpunkt meiner Forschung: daher wirst du gebeten, ein bis zwei Bilder von Animationscharakteren, die du magst und ein bis zwei Bilder von Charakteren, die du nicht magst, zum Interview mitzubringen. Diese Charaktere sollen von dir selbst gewählt werden und entweder ausgedruckt (zB. als Bild) oder als digitale Fotos, zum Interview mitgenommen werden.

Die Teilnahme an diesem Forschungsprojekt ist freiwillig. Du selbst kannst entscheiden, ob du mitmachen willst oder nicht. Wenn du teilnehmen willst, brauche ich deine schriftliche Zustimmung sowie auch die deiner Eltern. Vor dem Interview frage ich dich auch noch einmal, ob du noch immer mitmachen willst. Wenn du nicht mehr mitmachen willst, kannst du jederzeit aufhören. Dafür musst du mir keinen Grund angeben.

Während unseres Interviews werde ich einige Informationen anhand von Sprachaufnahmen und Notizen machen. Wenn du nicht mehr am Projekt teilnehmen willst, werden all diese Daten sofort gelöscht. Wenn du bis zum Ende mitmachen willst, werden deine Informationen nach Abschluss dieses Projekts gelöscht (im Juni 2024). Alle Informationen über dich werden anonymisiert - das bedeutet, dass niemand weiß, dass diese Informationen dich betreffen. Die Informationen werden außerdem nur für meine Arbeit genutzt.

Wenn du wissen willst, welche Daten ich über dich gesammelt habe, muss ich dir diese sofort zeigen. Du hast auch das Recht, dass ich Informationen über dich lösche und ausbesser, wenn sie falsch sind. Du kannst auch nach einer Kopie der Informationen über dich fragen. Wenn du glaubst, dass ich deine Informationen schlecht behandle, kannst du gerne mit der Organisation The Norwegian Data Protection Authority sprechen. All diese Schritte sind für deine eigene Sicherheit und die Sicherheit der Informationen über dich.

Wenn du am Projekt teilnehmen willst oder Fragen bezüglich des Projekts hast, können du oder deine Eltern mich per Email unter vanessa@holzeis.net oder telefonisch unter +436804012606 kontaktieren. Die Betreuerin der Masterarbeit an der NTNU - Linn C. Lorgen - kann auch per Email unter linn.c.lorgen@ntnu.no kontaktiert werden. Wenn du Fragen zur Sicherheit deiner Daten hast, melde dich bitte bei SIKT per Email personverntjenester@sikt.no oder telefonisch unter +47 73 98 40 40.


Mit freundlichen Grüßen,
Vanessa Holzeis

# Einwilligungsformular

Ich habe Informationen über das Projekt der Masterarbeit erhalten und verstanden. Ich habe die Möglichkeit bekommen, Fragen zu dem Projekt zu stellen.
Ich stimme zu:

☐ an einem Interview teilzunehmen

Ich willige auch ein, dass Informationen über mich bis zum Ende des Projekts aufbewahrt und verwendet werden dürfen.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
(Name des Kindes und Unterschrift)


-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
(Unterschrift der Eltern / Erziehungsberechtigten und Datum)

**Appendix 6: Interview guide (English)**

# Interview Guideline ENGLISH
# „Children's Interpretation of Animated Characters in Media"

## 1. Introduction                                          Duration 5 Min.

*Aim: Introduction, Consent, Ethical considerations, Warm up, Icebreaker*

➢ *Introduction, Greetings*
➢ *Explanation of the methodology, technique recording, anonymity, consent*
➢ *Brief introduction: Participants and researchers introduce each other briefly: name, age, place of residence*
➢ *Icebreaker (one of these possible questions):* What are your hobbies? What is your favorite movie? What is your favorite food?

Today's topic of this conversation will be animated characters. Therefore you were asked to bring some pictures with you...

## 2. Getting to know the chosen characters                Duration 10 Min.

*Aim: Explanation of the chosen characters as well as a description and getting to know them*

To start, we're going to talk about your chosen characters in general.

➢ Which characters did you choose? What are their names? What type of media are they from (film, game, series,...)?
➢ What can be seen in the pictures? (Visual description of the character)
➢ What is your character's role in the movie/series/game?
➢ How would you describe the character in a few words? (Brief and rough description of the character's characteristics → it will be discussed in more detail later on)

## 3. Characters, understanding of gender and gender norms     Duration 10 Min.

*Aim: Collecting information about the perception of the characters and their gender and the connection with gender norms in society*
*→ Answering research question 1: How are children's interpretations of characters inflected with gender norms?*

Based on your chosen characters, I would now like to talk to you about gender.

➢ Have you ever heard the word gender? What does gender mean to you? What is your understanding of the word gender?
➢ What do you think is typical for a woman/girl or for a man/boy? How would you describe a woman(girl) /man(boy)?
➢ What qualities do you think of when you think of a woman(girl)/man(boy)?
➢ How would you interpret your character's gender?
➢ Are your characters typical for a gender?

## 4.  Characteristics and understanding of gender                    Duration 15 Min.

> Aim: To go into more detail about the characteristics and understanding of gender and how these are related
> → Answering research question 2: How are positive and negative characteristics in animated characters intertwined with
> the children's understanding of gender?

- ➢ Can you name positive qualities of your character that you like?
- ➢ Can you name negative qualities of your character that you dislike?

- ➢ **RANKING**: Now I would like you to rank 5 characteristics of your character for me (best characteristic to worst characteristic).
- ➢ Why did you choose these qualities?
- ➢ Tell me why you ranked these characteristics in this way?

- ➢ Earlier you mentioned the following characteristics (*insert those mentioned earlier*) regarding women and men; do these also apply to your character?
- ➢ Is one of your ranked characteristics typically female/typically male?

## 5.  The ideal Character                    Duration 20 Min.

> Aim: Finding out the ideal characters and characteristics in relation to gender.
> → Additional information for research questions 1 and 2

We've already talked a lot about existing characters. Now I want to talk to you about your ideal and made up character.

- ➢ **DRAWING**: Now you can draw a character that you consider to be the ideal character in a series/movie/game (no matter good or evil).
- ➢ Who or what did you draw?
- ➢ Could you tell me about your character and its story / everyday life?
- ➢ Why is this the ideal character for you? (What are your character traits?)
- ➢ If your character existed in real life, would you like to be friends with him? If yes why? If no, why not?

- ➢ Is there anything you want to say, that we haven't talked about?
Debriefing, ending the interview, thanking, saying goodbye,...

# Gesprächsleitfaden DEUTSCH
## „Children's Interpretation of Animated Characters in Media"

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### 1. Einleitung                                        Dauer 5 Min.

> *Ziel: Vorstellung, Zustimmung, Ethische Wichtigkeiten, Warming up, Eisbrecher*

- ➢ *Begrüßung*
- ➢ *Erklärung der Methodik, Technikaufnahme, Anonymität, Einwilligung*
- ➢ *Kurze Vorstellung:* Teilnehmer\*in und Forscherin stellen sich gegenseitig kurz vor: Name, Alter, Wohnort
- ➢ *Eisbrecher (eine dieser mögliche Fragen):* Was sind deine Hobbies? Was ist dein Lieblingsfilm? Was ist dein Lieblingsessen?

Das heutige Thema dieses Gesprächs werden Animationscharaktere sein. Dafür hast du ja einige Bilder mitgebracht...

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### 2. Kennenlernen der ausgewählten Charaktere             Dauer 10 Min.

> *Ziel: Erläuterung der mitgebrachten Charaktere sowie Beschreiben und Kennenlernen dieser*

Zu Beginn werden wir mal allgemein über deine ausgewählten Charaktere sprechen.

- ➢ Welche Charaktere hast du ausgewählt? Wie heißen diese? Aus welchem Medium sind sie (Film, Spiel, Serie,...)?
- ➢ Was ist auf den Bildern erkennbar? (Visuelle Beschreibung des Charakters)
- ➢ Welche Rolle hat dein Charakter im Film / in der Serien / im Spiel?
- ➢ Wie würdest du den Charakter in wenigen Wörtern beschreiben? (Kurze und grobe Beschreibung der Eigenschaften des Charakters → später wird genauer darauf eingegangen)

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### 3. Charaktere, das Verständnis von Gender und Gendernormen     Dauer 10 Min.

> *Ziel: Erhebung von Informationen über die Wahrnehmung der Charaktere und deren Geschlecht sowie den Zusammenhang mit Gendernormen in der Gesellschaft*
> *→ Beantwortung von Forschungsfrage 1: How are children's interpretations of characters inflected with gender norms?*

Basierend auf deinen ausgewählten Charakteren möchte ich nun mit dir über Gender sprechen.

- ➢ Hast du das Wort Gender/Geschlecht schon einmal gehört? Was bedeutet Gender für dich? Was verstehst du unter diesem Wort?
- ➢ Was macht deiner Meinung nach eine Frau (Mädchen) /einen Mann (Bub) aus? Wie würdest du eine Frau (Mädchen) /einen Mann (Bub) beschreiben?
- ➢ An welche Eigenschaften denkst du, wenn du an eine Frau/einen Mann denkst?
- ➢ Wie würdest du das Geschlecht (Gender) deines Charakters interpretieren?
- ➢ Entspricht dein Charakter den typischen Geschlechtervorstellungen?

## 4. Eigenschaften und das Verständnis von Gender                    Dauer 15 Min.

*Ziel: Genaueres Eingehen auf Eigenschaften und Verständnis von Gender sowie wie diese zusammenhängen*
*→ Beantwortung von Forschungsfrage 2: How are positive and negative characteristics in animated characters intertwined with*
*the children's understanding of gender?*

- ➢ Kannst du mir positive Eigenschaften von deinem Charakter nennen, die du magst?
- ➢ Kannst du mir negative Eigenschaften von deinem Charakter nennen, die du weniger magst?

- ➢ **RANKING:** Nun möchte ich bitte, dass du 5 Eigenschaften deines Charakters in eine Reihenfolge für mich bringst (beste Eigenschaft zu schlechteste Eigenschaft).
- ➢ Warum hast du dich für diese Eigenschaften entschieden?
- ➢ Erzähl mir bitte, warum du diese Eigenschaften so geordnet hast?

- ➢ Vorhin hast du folgende Eigenschaften (*vorhin genannte einfügen*) bezüglich Frauen und Männer erwähnt; treffen diese auch auf deinen Charakter zu?
- ➢ Ist eine deiner geordneten Eigenschaften typisch weiblich/typisch männlich?
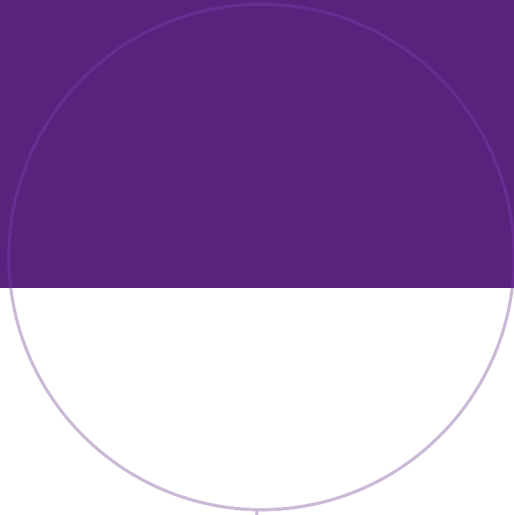
## 5. Der ideale Charakter                    Dauer 20 Min.

*Ziel: Herausfinden der idealen Charaktere und Eigenschaften in Bezug auf Gender.*
*→ Zusätzliche Informationen für Forschungsfragen 1 und 2*

Wir haben jetzt viel über schon bestehende Charaktere gesprochen. Nun möchte ich mit dir über deinen idealen Charakter sprechen.

- ➢ **DRAWING:** Jetzt kannst du einen Charakter zeichnen, der für dich der ideale Charakter in einer Serie / Film / Spiel ist (egal ob gut oder böse).
- ➢ Wen oder was hast du hier gezeichnet?
- ➢ Kannst du mir mehr über deinen Charakter und dessen Alltag / Geschichte erzählen?
- ➢ Warum ist dies der ideale Charakter für dich? (Welche Eigenschaften hat dein Charakter?)
- ➢ Wenn es deinen Charakter in echt geben würde, würdest du gerne mit ihm befreundet sein? Wenn, ja warum? Wenn nein, warum nicht?

- ➢ Gibt es noch etwas, worüber du reden willst, was wir bis jetzt noch nicht besprochen haben?
- ➢ *Beenden des Interviews, Bedanken, Verabschieden,...*