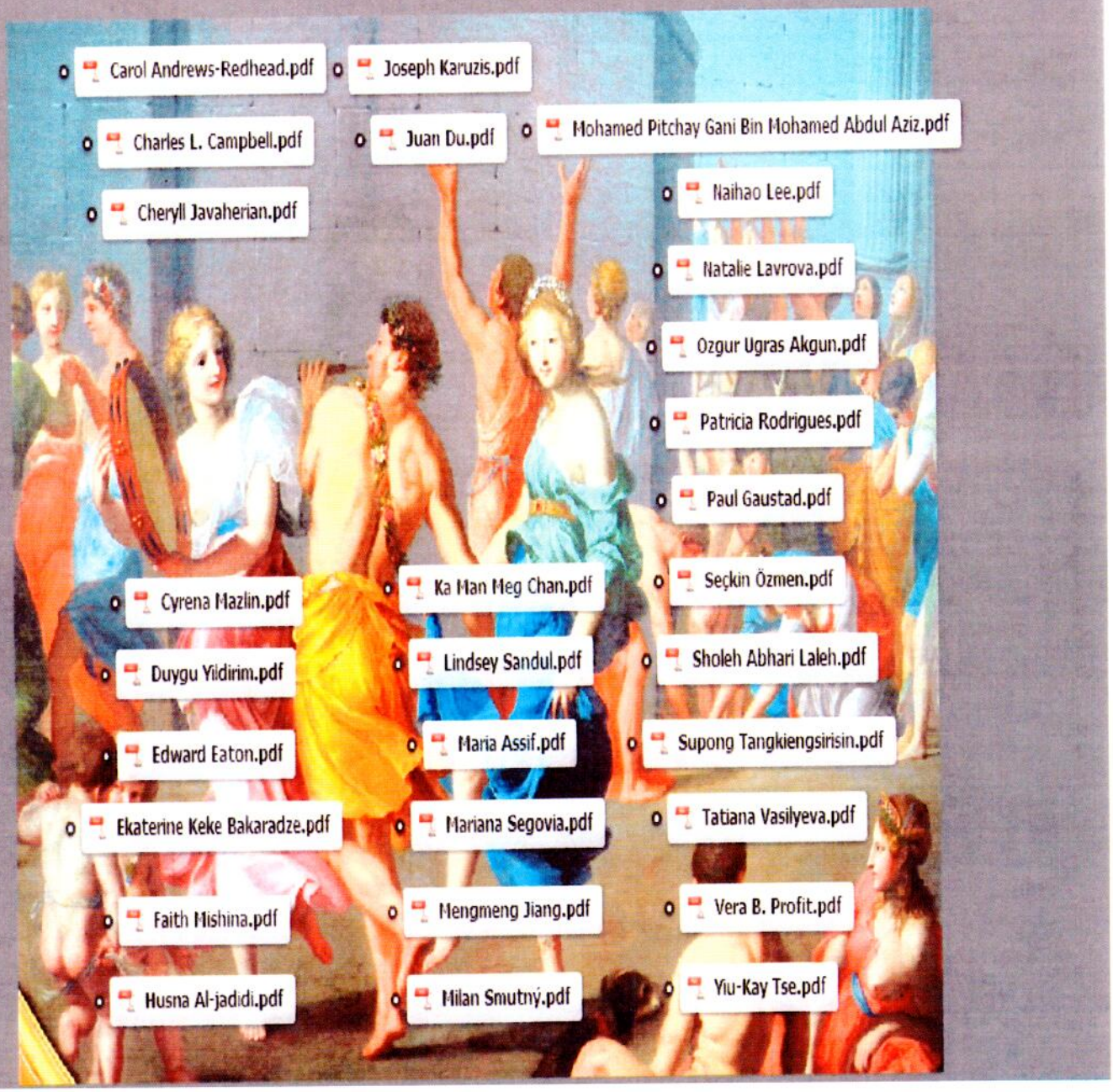
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Hero Perceptions of Children from Different Cultures: Turkey and United States of America

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Abstract: Effects of mass media on children have been widely discussed. According to these studies, especially children's cognitive development is to be effected by media. Hence, children are mostly affected by heroes in television programs. Heroes would be transferred to children through different channels of media. Children from different cultural backgrounds were interviewed in order to understand whether there are similarities or differences on their perceptions. The study investigates childrens' hero choices, hero attributions and characteristics attributed to heroes of children. The study also seeks evidence whether there are similarities and/or differences on childrens' choices due to culture they belong. Which ones of them are real heroes for children? Which characteristics do they have? Are there any gender differences in children's hero choices? How does media affect childrens' development? A qualitative method, in-depth interview, is used for this study. Children are asked to respond to open-ended questions while interviews are directed according to their responses. Questions are semi-structured to ask what children considered to be important in their lives and to understand their thoughts on heroes deeply. Therefore, interview questions varied from one interview to another, and individual personalities and perspectives emerged during the fieldwork. In the study, interviewee are elementary school students from Turkey and USA.

Keywords: Hero, Children, Perception, Culture

Introduction

Children and related topics have been widely discussed since the early 20th century (Hill 1911, Barnes 1900). Especially child development, cultural impacts and social influences of mass media are some of these important topics (Banning 1955, Lyness 1952). Scholars discuss that the effects of culture and other social factors may affect children's development; thus, during their development period, children look for role models (Anderson and Cavallaro, 2002). Children perceive heroes from television, movies, comics and similar medium as role models. Gender would be accepted as an important variable on children's perceptions of heroes. Erikson (1980) discuses that heroes are so significant for children both associating with a model and also providing them with a way to understand their culture and place in society. Children do not only learn at school and from their parents, but also media, especially television, teach them many things. These taughed by television provide them a model in order to be involved in society themselves. Children need something to complete their sexual, cognitive, psychological developments. As informed by uses and the gratification theory, some of these needs are supplied by media.

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Children grow up getting influenced by television, many kinds of magazines and picture books. Mass media present many stereotyped gender images. Popular characters and heroes spread other media, and marketing strategies tie them in with toys and other things attracting children's attention. Children have gendered experiences in role-playing games from television programs. Inoue (1990) argues that boys tend to be hidden from female-oriented media and are disturbed relating to themselves to female models in a society based on men as the basic form of human being, while girls could identify themselves with male models in the media.

Cognitive theory is a learning theory of psychology that attempts to explain human behavior by understanding the thought processes. Once children are born, they are socialized according to their gender. Parents explicitly and implicitly convey to their children gender-appropriate behavior. Social cognitive theory assumed that in the course of development, the regulation of behavior shifts from predominantly external sanctions to gradual substitution of internal sanctions and mandates rooted in personal standards. "Initially, behavior is self-regulated on the basis of anticipatory outcomes mediated by social environment. With increasing experience, social knowledge, and cognitive development, children construct their own personal standards relating to gender-linked conduct" (Bussey, Bandura 1992; 1238). Children are not expected to adopt sex-typed behaviors consistently before about age 6, because they have labeled themselves unalterably as a boy or a girl at this age (Bussey, Bandura 1992; 1236). Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) states that children's growing cognitive competence is one factor involved in their gender-related development. Gender development depends on many things from proximal social influences of parents, teachers, and peers to media and cultural institutions' distal and symbolic influences.

It is obvious that the sex of an individual plays an important role in learning process. Role theory suggests that the expectations an individual holds regarding appropriate in a given situation will have important effects upon that person's actual performance. A source of the perception of the sex role appropriateness of a particular task likely is the observation of the sex models engaged in the task. Both role theory and social learning theory (Bandura 1977) explain that the observation of the behavior of an appropriate model is an important determinant of role expectations. The "appropriate of a model depends on many factors, including the similarity between the model and observer (Feldman, Vorwerk, Rood 1977). Piaget (1951) defined that social arbitrary knowledge such as language, values, rules, morality and symbol systems may be learned in interaction with the other people. When they are discussing, cognitive conflicts arise and higher quality understandings will emerge.

Bandura's major premise is that we can learn by observing others. He considers vicarious experience to be the typical way that human beings change. He claims that modeling can have as much impact as direct experience. Social learning theory is a general theory of human behavior, but Bandura and people concerned with mass communication have used it specifically to explain media effects. Bandura warned that "children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses, and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling" (Bandura 1977; 39). People learn through observing others' behavior, attitudes, and outcomes of those behaviors. "Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action." (Bandura).

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Social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences. Bandura believed in "reciprocal determinism", that is, the world and a person's behavior cause each other, while behaviorism essentially states that one's environment causes one's behavior, Bandura, who was studying adolescent aggression, found this too simplistic, and so in addition he suggested that behavior causes environment as well. Later, Bandura soon considered personality as an interaction between three components: the environment, behavior, and one's psychological processes (one's ability to entertain images in minds and language).

Most sex-role development theorists (Bandura 1969; Kohlberg 1966; Mischel 1966) connect the acquisition of sex role responses to differential male and female identification with social role models such as mothers, fathers, teachers, peers, and other important ones, including those observed via television and other mass media. These conditions lead boys and girls to select from among the role models and boys and girls tend to model same-sex models more than opposite-sex models and particularly same-sex models perceived as similar to the child herself or himself (Eisenstock 1984).

Children's heroes are classified by gender. This classification is generally clear; but some heroes are labeled as non-gender specific. Children are asked about their own personal hero and the qualities that person exhibits. Jean Piaget (1951) who makes researches about cognitive development of children, pointed out that children must be at least eleven years-old to apperceive the abstract events. However, children face the new communication technologies before elementary school today, they perceive formal operations too early. Sartori defines that a child is a symbolic animal shaped with views of the world that has set up on visual and visuality. He says that a child who can not be seperated between right and wrong records whatever he/she sees like a sponge and records his/her memory. That is the main problem. Therefore, culture, identity and vision got in childhood term have an important determining in the life of individual. Freud also defines somebody's childhood is always on his/her back until they pass away. E. H. Erikson theorized that heroes are not only beneficial to children as models, but they also show a way to understand their culture and place in society.

Erikson (1977) suggested that heroes point out significant influence on individuals and cultures. Children create heroes and their myths and legends their dreams and dramas. Deriving hero themes is one way in which children understand their society, their role within that society, and their potential for positive impact on it (White, O'Brien 1999;83). Heroes facilitate children's moral development as individual or social case studies of values and belief systems. Changing children's conception of hero also depicts social shifts depending on culture. As society changes, conception of a hero is redefined.

Culture is an important aspect of any society. Matsumoto (1996) defines culture as "a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next". From this approach, culture would be discussed as a dynamic form of perceiving the world of a group of people. Media plays an important role on delivering cultural codes to society. Different cultures may perceive these codes which delivered by media differently.

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Method

Participants

The sample for this study was comprised of school aged children between the ages of 6 and 11 years old which consist of 9 interviewees (5 female and 4 male) from Turkey and 9 interviewees (5 female and 4 male) from the USA. The children from Turkey are elemantary school students in İstanbul city. The American children are elemantary school students from Mcallen, South Texas. The communities that surround these school systems can be described primarily as working to middle class.

Measure

We conducted audiotaped ethnographic interviews and textual analysis of data. Interviews were conducted between February 2009 and January 2010. In the study, data were collected from the sample by in depth-interviewing. Children were asked about their personal hero and the qualities that person exhibits. Children were asked to respond to open-ended questions, like "can you describe your hero?" and "why do you like (...)?" On the other hand interviews were directed according to children's responses. Therefore, interview questions varied from one interview to another; thus, individual personalities and perspectives emerged during the fieldwork. Some questions asked in this study are; 1. Which hero do you like the most? 2.Which character is your hero in TV programs you have watched? 3. Do you think that you have some behaviors like (...)? 4.Can you describe our hero to me? 5. Do you think that you have some characteristics similar to your hero? Data obtained with in-depth interviews were analysed with a descriptive approach.

Findings

Characteristics of Children's Heroes
Hero Attributes

Children describe heroes by providing several adjectives such as great, funny, brave, nice and outgoing. Both good and bad characteristics would be used to describe heroes. In the study, girls from both countries tend to choose characters due to physical view and interpersonal reasons. On the other hand, boys from Turkey and USA tend to choose their heroes due to their physical charateristics like strength. Responses of interviewees from Turkey and the USA show that children provide similar explanations about heroes. In the study, classified the adjectives which children explained their heroes in four distinct groups. The classification about children's hero selections was provided from previous research (Gash and Conway 1997; Simmons and Wade 1983,). According to this system, children were asked to group the heroes they chose in four groups. These groups consist of several related adjectives, and children made their selections according to the adjectives they thought more suitable. These groups are named as *instrumental attributes, expressive attributes, prestige attributes and sociable attributes* (Holub et.al., 2008).

According to this approach; in the current study, reponses of girls show that girls more likely placed their heroes under expressive and sociable attributes than boys. In contrast, boys endorsed their heroes as possessing more instrumental attributes than girls. Overall,

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respondents from Turkey and USA described their heroes by using similar adjectives; thus, this finding is consistent with previous research (Holub et.al., 2008).

Findings from both interviews do not show any distinct differences between children from Turkey and USA. In general, girls from both countries are more open choosing male heroes than boys. This finding, in general, is consistent with similar studies (Reeves and Miller, 1978; Eisenstock, 1984). However, responses of children may slightly diverse regarding describing the heroes they chose. Children from Turkey mostly describe heroes by using characteristics to describe their manners and physical attractiveness. Turkish interviewees use adjectives like funny, honest, outgoing and kindhearted. In contrast, children from USA mostly describe their heroes by their physical strength and superiority than others.

- My hero is Güven playing a role in a serial. He is young, good-looking, honest. *(C, 8, boy,Turkey)*
- Roberto Carlos, football player, is funny. *(B, 9, boy, Turkey)*
- I admire doctor Levent because of comic and outgoing. *(A, 10, girl, Turkey)*
- Sabiha is beautiful, kindhearted, helpful and she has a good job. *(F, 9, girl,Turkey)*
- I like Sonic the most. Because he runs fast and I like him like that. *(I, 8, boy, USA)*
- Aaron plays this game (baseball) better than others. *(J, 10, boy, USA)*
- Superman is the best hero because he is stronger than others. *(I, 7, boy, USA)*

Children find some characters closer than others, and in the couse of time, they may take these heroes as role models, and associate themselves with these characters. Some say not to be affected, but they accept to take role models. Through these role models, children may learn what they perceive to be normative behaviors for their own group as well as their perceptions of members from other groups (Greenberg and Mastro, 2008).

In the study, responses of children would be taken as an example. During interviews with Turkish children, the importance of this aspect would be recognized. In this regard, responses of interviewees from USA are also similar to interviewees from Turkey. As seen, some of children take role models who have talents they would like to have such as a football player, an actress or a doctor. Some state that they give up to endorse their heroes if they act differently or change their behavior. In addition, some children also use these heroes for identifying their friends. In the study, responses of children from Turkey and USA show that children use heroes for labeling themselves and their friends in this regard.

- My friend Ezgi loves Flora and wants to behave like Flora. There are a lot of things about Flora in her room. For example; in her room she is using a sheet and pillow case with Flora's pictures. *(E, 9, girl, Turkey)*
- I want to be an actress therefore I try to act like Dilber Hala. I am interested in her speech and behavior. In the future, I would like people to take me as a role model. *(A, 10, girl, Turkey)*
- Nil is a bad character, I don't like her. Duru is a good character. My cousin, Melis, is jealous of me, she looks like Nil. *(F , 9, girl, Turkey)*
- I give up to take a role model, when I realize some mistakes of ones I like. *(D, 8, boy, Turkey)*
- I watch Snow White's movies and dress like Snow White. *(N, 6, girl, USA)*
- I try to play like him (Michael Jordan), and imitate his moves. *(M, 8, boy, USA)*

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Answers of American children indicate that ethnicity may have an important influence on their choices of heroes. Findings of Gash and Conway (1997) show that the nationality plays an important role on choices of children. Interviews in the USA show that ethnic roots of children may affect their hero selections. For instance, most Hispanic interviewees admire a cartoon character named Dora the Explorer. "Dora is an animated girl who has light brown skin and dark brown eyes. Dora and her friend donkey Boots read maps, count and speak Spanish." (Guidotti-Hernandez, 2007)

- Stella is my hero, because she is following fashion and likes shopping. I like shopping too. She is 19-20 years old. I like her. I want to look like Stella. I like her eyes and physical features. *(E, 9, girl, Turkey)*
- Dora is my hero. Because she's a star. *(D1, 6, girl, USA)*
- I like Dora. I sing like Dora and I use the same words/phrases with her. *(S, 6, girl, USA)*
- He's (Aaron) really good. I want to play like him. I'm trying to imitate his moves. *(J, 10, boy, USA)*
- I sing and dance like her with a microphone. *(D2, 6, girl, USA)*

In the study, it is observed that children take both animated, fiction and real-life characters as heroes. Both interviewees consider characters from television serials like Hannah Montana and Doctor Levent, animation characters like Sponge Bob and Dora and sport figures like Roberto Carlos and Aaron. In addition, it is observed that older children more easily understand the difference between real and fiction, and make a distinction between them.

One interesting point would be distribution of the types of chraracters like animation heroes, sports figures and media characters among children. As seen here, responses of children from two different cultures vary from fantasy characters to real ones. For instance, majority of interviewees from Turkey consider fiction characters as their heroes. In contrast, majority of interviewees from USA consider animation characters as their heroes. In this study, Turkish children mostly tend to choose their heroes from serials like Dilber Ana and Doctor Guven; while American children mostly choose animation characters like Dora the Explorer and Superman. Sports figures are the second most selected types of characters for Turkish and American children.

- I like realistic characters. Superman is hardworking, but he is not my role model. I like footballers and I like Delgado because he is fair, honest, humble and a good footballer. He behaves children tenderly. *(S, 9, boy, Turkey)*
- Footballer Roberto Carlos is running fast and good footballer. *(B2, 9, boy, Turkey)*
- BenTen is human, but he is viewing like alien. *(C, 10, boy, Turkey)*
- Aaron plays this game (baseball) better than others. He has great moves. *(J1, 10, boy, USA)*
- Michael Jordan is the best basketball player. *(M, 8, boy, USA)*
- Supergirl is my hero. Because she rescues people and fights against bad people. *(T, 7, girl, USA)*

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Hero Gender

Society teaches boys and girls their roles by emphasizing social codes belonging male and female. Boys are expected masculine traits like strength, valor, success, and avoidance of feminine traits. Children would like to have some materials depicting their heroes. Children generally associated with heroes having same gender. In this study, responses of children show that hero gender perceptions of children include male, female and non-gender. As seen, girls and boys choose different types of heroes. Overall, boys choose sport figures, and superheroes more than girls. On the other hand, girls tend to choose female heroes, they usually reject non-gender figures. In addition, boys tend to reject choosing a female character as hero, even they say that it is scornful. Findings of this study are consistent with previous research findings (Reeves and Miller, 1978; Eisenstock, 1984). In addition, it's observed that American children didn't choose non-gender heroes; however, Some of Turkish interviewees chose non-gender figures.

- Sponge Bob is actually sponge but like a man. He is living under the sea. *(M, 10, girl, Turkey)*
- Their gender is not clear. *(F ,9, girl, Turkey)*
- Man heroes are ruder than girl heroes, therefore there is nothing I can get from man heroes. Especially, men is rude. Cartoons is comic, I usually think Sponge Bob, is man. *(E, 9, girl, Turkey)*
- Dora is my hero, because I like her very much. *(D1, 6, girl, USA)*
- Snow White has seven dwarves and she helps them. *(N, 6, girl, USA)*
- Aaron is in the best team. He's a great player! *(J1, 10, boy, USA)*
- I like Sonic the most. Because he runs fast and I like him like that. *(I, 7, boy, USA)*

In addition, children from Turkey and USA mostly understand whether characters are good or bad by observing their attitudes and behaviors. Even though, children may have difficulties understanding the motives of characters, they understand the concept of a motive (Berndt & Berndt, 1975). In other words, assessments of children are based on visible actions of heroes. From this perspective, interviews show that most children make a distinction among heroes regarding their behaviors. Interviewees from Turkey and USA make their assessments about heroes by evaluating their visible actions.

- Aslı is hero for me, because she is confident. She is living many adventures but she can protect herself. *(R,8, girl, Turkey)*
- My hero is Levent. I like his behavior, he is speaking and helping İnci. *(A, 10, girl, Turkey)*
- Snow White is good because she helps dwarves and fights against the witch. (N, 6, Girl, USA)

Discussion

This research reveals that gender has an important role on the selection of heroes. Boys from Turkey and USA are more conservative on choosing heroes with same gender than girls. Girls choose heroes with an opposite gender more than boys. This finding supports the contention of theories of gender socialization. According to the theory; children learn to value and

emulate same gender figures (Bussey and Bandura 1992). Girls can be more flexible than boys on choosing opposite gender heroes. In current study, boys behave more strict than girls while they are choosing a hero. Interviews show that choosing a female hero is considered almost as an insult by boys. In other words, the gender of a hero has been found to be more important for boys than for girls.

All male interviewees from Turkey and USA strictly chose same gender characters. Furthermore, they mostly describe heroes by stressing on their physical strengths. In contrast, girls' responses are not as consistent as boys' in terms of gender. In the study, some Turkish girl respondents chose non-gender or male characters. This finding is consistent with previous studies. On the other hand, American girls responded differently to this issue than girls from Turkey. Unlike Turkish girls, during interviews, all American girls chose female heroes. This finding may also reflect the importance of cultural differences. At this point, culture may be considered as a strong variable, and from this perspective findings of the study would be used for future research.

Researchers state that superhero characters negatively influence young children's behavior. The study reveals that children tend to imitate both prosocial and aggressive characters on television and watching these characters influence a child's action. During interviews, majority of American children consider animation characters as their heroes. Superheroes with extraordinary powers forms the majority of these selected animation characters. Characters from television serials are mostly chosen by the majority of Turkish children. This contradiction may be an interesting research topic, and previous findings could be helpful for future studies.

Television may be a more effective instrument for expanding sex-role consciousness among young people (Eisenstock 1984). Mass media for children consist of many stereotyped gender images. Popular characters spread into other media and marketing strategies tied them in with lots of things related to children like toys, pencil, pencil case and foods. The research reveals that children from two countries heroes has concentrated on children's ideals. For example; girls choose people they would most like to be because of physical attractiveness or interpersonal reasons, whereas boys report choosing ideal figures because of their physical strength or wealth. Boys would like to have the characteristics of supernatural heroes. They admiringly observe them. A research reveals that developments in technology and media have allowed social learning to extend beyond real life models to symbolic models, as shown on television and films (Klinger, Hamilton, Cantrell 2001;13). Thus, this research's findings are extensively supported by other research conducted in different countries by many researchers mentioned in the current study.

Social-psychological communication perspective comes out the theory of uses and gratifications (McQuail, 1994). According to; uses and gratifications research, audience are aware of their psychological needs and select media to gratify these needs. The uses and gratifications model tries to define the psychological needs of audience. It could be possible to say children's choices of heroes are related with their demands and needs.

Campell (1988) defines that the hero archetype involves the central character, or protagonist, who must temporarily separate from the ordinary world to experience a series of physical or psychological trials. This definition matchs up with this researches findings. Children's definition about their heroes confirm Campell's definition. This study revealed that children

choose someone having supernatural power as hero, or their heroes have superior characteristics, as Campell mentioned.

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