

An Analysis of Children's Perceptions of Gender Roles in *Charlie and Lola*

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Abstract. An Analysis of Children's Perceptions of Gender Roles in *Charlie and Lola*

Animated media plays an essential role in shaping children's understanding of gender roles, often reinforcing traditional stereotypes through character behaviour and narratives (Gilmore & Jordan, 2012). Previous research has shown that male characters tend to be more active, while female characters are frequently portrayed as passive (England et al., 2011; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). It has been recently emphasized, however, that there is a need to explore how children interpret these portrayals, as perceptions may differ across age and gender (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). This study examines gender representation in the animated series *Charlie and Lola* through a content analysis of characters' behaviours and communication activities in 11 episodes and group interviews with a group of 3rd graders (n = 23) and a group of 5th and 6th graders (n = 29). Firstly, the content analysis reveals that *Charlie and Lola* contains both traditional and progressive gender portrayals and that character dynamics are also influenced by the sibling structure, with Charlie, as the older brother, taking on leadership and problem-solving roles. However, Lola's high verbal participation and assertiveness challenge conventional stereotypes. Secondly, the group interviews assessed children's perceptions showing that older participants demonstrated greater awareness of gender roles and gender equality compared to younger participants. Notably, older children provided more responses overall and showed no lack of understanding of gender equality, indicating a more advanced stage of cognitive maturity that allows for greater engagement with abstract social concepts. Moreover, children were more likely to challenge gender stereotypes than reinforce them.

Keywords: *gender roles, gender equality, children's perceptions, audiovisual input, content analysis.*

Resum. Anàlisi de les percepcions infantils sobre els rols de gènere a *Charlie i Lola*. Els dibuixos animats juguen un paper essencial en la construcció de la comprensió dels infants sobre els rols de gènere, sovint reforçant estereotips tradicionals a través del comportament dels personatges i les seves narratives (Gilmore & Jordan, 2012). Investigacions prèvies han mostrat que els personatges masculins tendeixen a ser més actius, mentre que els femenins solen aparèixer com a més passius (England et al., 2011; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Tanmateix, s'ha subratllat recentment la necessitat d'explorar com interpreten els infants aquestes representacions, ja que les percepcions poden variar segons l'edat i el gènere (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Aquest estudi examina la representació de gènere a la sèrie animada *Charlie & Lola* mitjançant una anàlisi de contingut de les conductes i activitats comunicatives dels personatges en 11 episodis, així com entrevistes grupals amb alumnes de 3r (n = 23) i de 5è i 6è (n = 29) de primària. En primer lloc, l'anàlisi de contingut revela que, tot i que *Charlie & Lola* presenta tant representacions tradicionals com progressistes del gènere, la dinàmica dels personatges també està influenciada per l'estructura fraternal, amb en Charlie, com a germà gran, assumint rols de lideratge i resolució de problemes. No obstant això, la participació verbal freqüent i l'assertivitat de la Lola desafien els estereotips convencionals. En segon lloc, les entrevistes grupals que van avaluar les percepcions dels infants indiquen que els participants més grans van demostrar una major consciència dels rols de gènere i la igualtat de gènere en comparació amb els més petits. Principalment, els nens més grans van proporcionar més respostes en general i no van mostrar cap manca de comprensió sobre la igualtat de gènere, fet que indica un estadi més avançat de maduresa cognitiva que els permet una major implicació amb conceptes socials abstractes. A més, en general, tots el participants van tendir més a desafiar els estereotips de gènere que a reforçar-los.

Paraules clau: *rols de gènere, igualtat de gènere, percepcions infantils, input audiovisual, anàlisi de contingut.*

1. Introduction

Media, particularly cartoons and animated television shows, play a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions of gender roles. Through repeated exposure to symbolic models, children learn what behaviours are deemed appropriate for their gender, either reinforcing or challenging societal norms (Smith, 1994). According to Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986), children learn by observing and imitating behaviours from models, including those portrayed in television shows. In this way, characters in children's media serve as powerful role models, shaping children's understanding of gender norms and expectations (Gilmore & Jordan, 2012). However, gender stereotypes, defined as beliefs about characteristics and attributes that differentiate men and women (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981), can limit children's development by influencing their aspirations, interests, and self-perceptions, potentially restricting their self-realization (Deloney, 2015).

A cognitive account of how children internalise and process gender information is offered by Gender Schema Theory (GST). According to Martin and Halverson (1981), children develop cognitive schemas that help them categorise and interpret information related to gender. These schemas not only shape how children perceive others but also guide how they evaluate their own behaviours and choices. Through repeated exposure to gendered messages in media and social interactions, children begin to selectively attend to and encode information that aligns with culturally reinforced gender norms.

Since the 1970s, researchers have examined the effects of television on children's gender-role stereotyping (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004), initially focusing on content analyses of gender representation in media. This body of research found that male characters tend to dominate screen time, engage in a wider variety of activities, and take on leadership roles, whereas female characters are often relegated to passive or supportive roles (England et al., 2011; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Over time, scholars have shifted their focus toward how these portrayals affect children's attitudes, aspirations, and behaviours (Coyne et al., 2016).

Despite this growing body of work, relatively little attention has been given to how children themselves interpret these gendered messages in the media. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how children perceive gender roles and equality in the animated cartoon *Charlie and Lola* (Carrington & Child, 2005–2008) while also conducting a content analysis of the show's potentially gendered behaviours and communication patterns. By integrating media analysis with children's responses, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of how animated media contributes to children's gender socialization.

2. Literature Review

Animated media is a powerful agent of gender socialization, shaping how children understand masculinity, femininity, and gender norms. Studies have consistently shown that animated content often presents stereotypical portrayals of male and female characters, reinforcing traditional expectations of gender roles (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Male characters are frequently depicted as strong, independent, and dominant, taking on leadership roles and engaging in action-oriented narratives, while female characters are more likely to be portrayed as passive, nurturing, and focused on appearance or relationships (England et al., 2011). The persistent reinforcement of traditional gender roles in animated media highlights the importance of critically examining how these portrayals contribute to children's gender development and socialization.

One of the most influential content analyses on gender in animation was the study by Thompson and Zerbinos (1995). These researchers conducted a comprehensive content analysis of gender roles in children's animated cartoons, comparing portrayals from the 1970s to those of the 1990s. The study analysed 175 episodes from 41 different

cartoons, coding male, female, and androgynous characters based on their prominence, behaviours, communication styles, and talk time. The findings revealed a significant gender imbalance, with male characters appearing more frequently, engaging in more diverse behaviours, and having significantly more dialogue than female characters. Female characters were often portrayed in traditional gender roles, characterized by passivity, emotionality, and dependency, while male characters displayed more leadership, assertiveness, and problem-solving abilities.

On the other hand, female characters in newer cartoons were more independent, assertive, and competent than in earlier decades, reflecting broader societal changes in gender representation. The research also identified differences based on cartoon genres, with “teachy-preachy” cartoons depicting more gender-balanced and prosocial behaviours compared to “chase-and-pratfall” or “continuing adventure” cartoons, which tended to reinforce traditional gender norms. The study underscores the influential role of animated media in shaping children’s perceptions of gender roles and highlights the need for continued research on the impact of such portrayals on young audiences.

Later research confirmed these trends. England et al. (2011), for instance, conducted a systematic content analysis of Disney princess movies to examine the extent to which these films reinforced or challenged traditional gender roles. Their study analysed female protagonists’ behaviours, levels of agency, and gendered characteristics across three distinct eras: early princess films (1937–1959), renaissance-era princesses (1989–1999), and modern princesses (2009–2010). The results revealed a clear evolution in female characterization, with newer princesses displaying greater independence, assertiveness, and problem-solving abilities. However, despite these progressive shifts, traditional gender roles remained deeply ingrained. Even modern princesses, while more active in their narratives, continued to exhibit high levels of domesticity, emotional expressiveness, and a focus on romantic relationships.

While content analyses have provided valuable insights into gender representation, less research has focused on how children interpret and internalize these portrayals. Developmental psychology suggests that children as young as three years old begin forming rigid gender schemas, influenced by cultural messages, parental reinforcement, and media exposure (Halim et al., 2014). In their study, Halim et al. (2014) found that young children often exhibit strong gender-typed preferences for toys, clothing, and activities, frequently justifying them with essentialist reasoning, such as believing that certain behaviours are inherently tied to being a boy or a girl. Their study highlighted the significant role of media exposure in reinforcing these early schemas, showing that children who engage with highly gendered content are more likely to internalize traditional gender norms, while those exposed to counter-stereotypical portrayals demonstrate greater flexibility in their gender perceptions. These findings emphasise the importance of investigating not only the gendered content in children’s media but also how young viewers process, accept, or challenge these portrayals.

Aubrey and Harrison's (2004) was one of the few studies linking media content with children's gender perceptions. They conducted a two-in-one study examining the gender-role content of children's favourite television programs and how this content relates to their gender-related perceptions. The first study analysed gender-role messages in a sample of television programs preferred by first- and second-grade children, coding male and female characters' behaviours, communication styles, and personality traits. While the findings indicated a degree of gender neutrality in the preferred programs, male characters still appeared more frequently and were more likely to exhibit traits such as answering questions, showing ingenuity, achieving goals, and eating. Female characters, on the other hand, had fewer active roles, though there was some evidence of counter-stereotypical portrayals.

The second study investigated how children's preferences for gender-stereotypical, counter-stereotypical, or gender-neutral content correlated with their gender-role values and attraction to same- or opposite-gender characters. The results showed that boys' preference for male-stereotypical content was associated with valuing hard work and humour, while girls' preference for female counter-stereotypical and gender-neutral content predicted stronger interpersonal attraction to female characters. However, preference for male-stereotypical content negatively predicted girls' attraction to female characters, suggesting that highly gendered portrayals can influence how children relate to media figures. These findings underscore television's role in shaping children's gender perceptions and the potential for counter-stereotypical portrayals to impact how they relate to characters.

Research also suggests that children are active interpreters of media. Coyne et al. (2016) investigated the influence of gender portrayals in children's media on gendered self-perceptions and behaviours, particularly in relation to superhero characters. Their study followed a longitudinal design, examining how exposure to superhero media influenced children's gender-stereotypical play, aggression, and perceptions of gender roles over time. The findings revealed that boys who watched superhero content more frequently were more likely to engage in physically aggressive play, reinforcing the idea that media exposure contributes to the internalization of traditional masculine norms, such as dominance and strength.

Interestingly, while girls also consumed superhero media, they were less likely to engage in aggression, suggesting that they did not interpret these portrayals in the same way as boys. The study also found that exposure to superhero media was associated with stronger adherence to gender stereotypes in both boys and girls, shaping their expectations about male and female behaviours. These results align with broader research on media effects, demonstrating that gendered representations in animated content can significantly shape children's attitudes, play behaviours, and self-concepts. Coyne et al. (2016) emphasize the need for more diverse and counter-stereotypical portrayals in children's media to offer alternative models of gender expression and expand children's understanding of gender roles beyond traditional binaries.

The present study investigates how primary school children interpret and respond to the gendered portrayals in *Charlie and Lola*, incorporating group interviews to capture their reflections on gender norms, parental roles, and the influence of media. By linking media content to children's perceptions, the study aligns with Aubrey and Harrison's (2004) approach and thereby provides a more comprehensive understanding of how animated media represents and potentially reinforces or challenges gender roles in young audiences. In this context, GST will be particularly useful to understand how young viewers process the gender portrayals in cartoons and how those portrayals may align with the children's existing beliefs and experiences about gender roles and equality. While previous research has often treated children as passive recipients of media messages, this design acknowledges their interpretive agency. We selected *Charlie and Lola* as a case study due to its widespread popularity, its child-directed conversational tone, and the presence of a sibling dynamic that provides contrasting gendered behaviours in everyday contexts. This combination allows for a more nuanced understanding of how media contributes to gender socialization and how children make sense of these messages in relation to their own social world in an understudied area. The first two research questions focus on the content analysis of the animated episodes, examining the representation of gender through communication patterns and behaviours. The latter two questions address participant perceptions, exploring how children interpret these portrayals and their awareness of gender roles and equality. With this dual-method design, we aim to examine both what is shown in the media and how children engage with it. These are the research questions that we pursued to answer:

- RQ1 – What types of behaviour (e.g., leadership, achieve or fail at a goal, show physical affection, etc.) are exhibited by the male and female characters in the videos?
- RQ2 – What communicative activities (e.g., ask or answer questions, express opinions, brag, order others, etc.) are exhibited by the male and female characters in the videos?
- RQ3 – What are participants' perceptions of gender stereotypical roles exhibited in the videos?
- RQ4 – What is participants' awareness of gender equality?

3. Methodology

3.1. Content analysis of *Charlie and Lola*

Eleven episodes of the animated series *Charlie and Lola* (Carrington & Child, 2005–2008) in its English original version were selected for this study due to the series' high suitability for the intended age group, both in terms of content and in terms of linguistic comprehension by L2 learners. Additionally, the series is widely known and popular among children, which helped ensure engagement and comprehension during the pedagogical intervention. The number of episodes was determined by the available

instructional time. The content analysis examines these episodes, systematically coding the presence and frequency of gender-related behaviours and communication activities among two main characters: Charlie, a 7-year-old boy, and Lola, a 4-year-old girl, and two minor characters, also one male and one female: Marv, Charlie's friend, and Lotta, Lola's friend. The coding scheme is adapted from previous research on animated media (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004) and included the following categories:

- **Behaviours:** show ingenuity, leadership, bravery/rescue, follow others, achieve a goal, fail at a goal, show physical affection, primp, cry and obey.
- **Communication activities:** Ask questions, answer questions, express opinions, brag, boss/order others, threaten others, verbally express anger, receive comments about body/beauty, make comments about body/beauty, and express verbal affection.

3.2. Participants and Procedure

The participants of this study consisted of 52 L1-Spanish/Catalan 3rd, 5th and 6th grade learners of English who were enrolled at an English language school. Their ages ranged from 9 to 12 years. Two groups were formed from five intact classes, categorized by school cycle: younger (3rd grade) and older (5th and 6th grade), as shown in Table 1. The division follows the Catalan education system, where 3rd grade is part of the middle cycle, while 5th and 6th grades belong to the superior cycle. Gender classification was based on classroom records and none of the participants manifested gender disconformity. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Bioethics Commission of the University of Barcelona. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians. Children were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS

		Boys	Girls	Total
Younger group (3rd grade)	3A	9	5	14
	3B	6	3	9
	TOTAL	15	8	23
Older group (5th and 6th grade)	5A	6	2	8
	5B	5	4	9
	6	6	6	12
	TOTAL	17	12	29

Participants watched 11 episodes of *Charlie and Lola* with English captions. Following the viewing sessions, they answered the question: “Do you think Charlie and Lola have a good relationship?” in a Likert-scale format (Figure 1).

1. No	2. Not much	3. A little	4. Quite a lot	5. A lot
				
<input type="checkbox"/>				

FIGURE 1. DO YOU THINK CHARLIE AN LOLA HAVE A GOOD RELATIONSHIP?

Then, group interviews were conducted in all five intact classes to allow participants to freely express their thoughts in a conversational setting. These interviews provided deeper insights into their perceptions and facilitated natural discussions among peers. The following questions were used to guide the interview:

- Why do you think Lola always wears a skirt?
- Do you think boys and girls are taught to dress differently? What do you think about that?
- What do you think about Charlie being the one who takes care of Lola?
- How are we taught to be girls and boys? Why?
- Where do you think Charlie and Lola’s parents are?
- Do you think parents generally have different roles just because they are men and women?
- Do you think the cartoons you watch influence how you act in real life?
- Do you know what gender equality is? What do you think about it?

The group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed anonymously. To maintain participant confidentiality, only gender markers (boy/girl) and group were noted in the transcripts, without any identifying information.

Prior to coding, the researchers reviewed the interview data and created a preliminary analysis scheme to identify relevant patterns and types of responses. Based on this initial review, all responses were classified using two emerging categories: Gender Roles and Gender Equality. Within these categories, responses were further classified according to specific types, as outlined below:

Gender Roles (GR) Classification

- GR0: Lack of awareness of gender roles
- GR1: Awareness of gender roles
- GR2: Reinforcement of gender roles

- GR3: Challenge to gender roles

Gender Equality (GE) Classification

- GE0: No understanding
- GE1: Basic understanding
- GE2: Advanced understanding

This structured coding system allowed for a systematic analysis of participants' perceptions, highlighting differences in gender awareness and equality-related discourse. Additionally, this classification enabled us to examine differences between younger and older participants, as well as between boys and girls, providing insights into how gender and age may influence children's perceptions of gender roles and gender equality.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Content analysis

The coding was conducted by two coders, namely the researchers themselves. Both coders trained together to ensure consistency in the application of categories. They were familiar with the research aims but collaborated to reduce subjectivity through joint decision-making. An inter-rater reliability analysis was conducted to ensure the consistency of the coding process. A comparison of 30% of the content yielded an inter-rater agreement of 93%, indicating a high level of reliability, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. See Appendix A.

Concerning the comparison of ingenuity and leadership behaviours between the two main characters, Charlie and Lola, the results shown in Table 2 indicate that Charlie, the older male character, exhibits more instances of ingenuity and leadership. He is also more successful in achieving his goals, reinforcing traditional depictions of male characters as competent problem-solvers and leaders (England et al., 2011; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). However, since Charlie is the elder sibling and often acts as a guide for Lola, this leadership role may stem from a combination of age and gender. Similarly, Lola's lower ingenuity, leadership and goal achieving scores may be influenced by her role as the younger sibling.

Marv and Lotta, as minor characters, display significantly fewer leadership or problem-solving traits when interacting with their respective friends, with Marv only taking the lead twice and Lotta never exhibiting leadership. This suggests that Charlie's dominance in leadership might be influenced not only by gender but also by his role as the older sibling to Lola and his status as a main character, in contrast to Marv, who is a secondary character. However, the fact that Charlie still surpasses Lola in both leadership and ingenuity reinforces gendered expectations of competence and control (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004).

Regarding the bravery/rescue category, results reveal another striking contrast: Charlie is the only character of all four who engages in acts of bravery or rescue, while no other character exhibits these behaviours. This finding aligns with the “heroic male” trope often seen in children’s media, where boys are more frequently depicted as protectors or rescuers (Coyne et al., 2016). Marv, despite also being male and of the same age as Charlie, does not display bravery or rescue behaviours, further suggesting that narrative function may influence character actions more than gender alone.

Emotional expression also reflects gendered trends found in prior research. Lola cries twice and Lotta once, whereas Charlie and Marv do not cry at all. This aligns with studies showing that female characters in animated media are more likely to express sadness or vulnerability (Halim et al., 2014). Similarly, primping (attending to one’s appearance) is almost exclusively a female behaviour in the show, with Lola and Lotta engaging in it more than Charlie or Marv, supporting findings that female characters in children’s media are often portrayed as more concerned with their appearance (England et al., 2011).

Interestingly, obedience does not follow traditional gender norms. Charlie obeys instructions more frequently than Lola or Lotta, contradicting studies that suggest girls are more likely to be portrayed as compliant and rule-following (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). However, this could be because Charlie, as the older sibling, also receives more responsibilities and must adhere to expectations of maturity, making obedience a reflection of his caretaker role rather than gendered expectations of passivity.

In terms of communication activities, shown in Table 3, Lola has the highest number of questions and answers, suggesting that she is an active participant in conversations, demonstrating curiosity and engagement. Charlie follows in number of questions and answers, indicating that while he also plays a significant communicative role, Lola’s inquisitive nature is more prominent. However, it is also essential to note that Lola, as the younger sibling, may naturally ask more questions as part of her role as a learner, whereas Charlie, the guide figure, provides more answers. Marv and Lotta, as minor characters, contribute significantly less to conversations.

In terms of expressing opinions, Lola does so most frequently, followed by Charlie; of the two minor characters, Lotta also expresses more opinions than Marv. This challenges traditional gender norms, as research has found that female characters in animated media are often depicted as less opinionated than male characters (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). However, since Lola is depicted as a very curious and funny girl, on top of being the protagonist, her verbal assertiveness may be a narrative choice rather than a gendered trait. A notable gendered pattern emerges in comments about body and beauty. Lola is the character who receives the most comments about her appearance and also makes a remark about someone else. Lotta also receives comments, though to a lesser extent. In contrast, neither Charlie nor Marv are subject to any comments about their appearance, although Charlie makes multiple remarks about others’. This supports research indicating that female characters in children’s media are far more likely to have their appearance discussed, reinforcing the idea that physical beauty is central to femininity (England et al., 2011).

TABLE 2. BEHAVIOURS

Name	Character	Gender	Show ingenuity	Show leadership	Bravery/rescue	Follow others	Achieve a goal	Fail at a goal	Show physical affection	Primp	Cry	Obeys
Charlie	Main	Boy	14	10	8	3	15	9	3	1	0	4
Lola	Main	Girl	6	2	0	4	6	10	5	5	2	1
Marv	Minor	Boy	0	2	0	6	0	3	0	0	0	0
Lotta	Minor	Girl	1	0	0	8	0	3	3	2	1	0

TABLE 3. COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

Name	Character	Gender	Ask questions	Answer questions	Express opinions	Brag	Boss order others	Threaten others	Express anger	Receive comment about body/beauty	Make comment about body/beauty	Express verbal affection
Charlie	Main	Boy	52	32	26	1	14	0	0	0	5	0
Lola	Main	Girl	63	50	42	5	12	2	2	6	1	2
Marv	Minor	Boy	12	4	4	0	1	0	0	0	2	0
Lotta	Minor	Girl	21	18	7	0	4	0	0	2	0	0

Regarding verbal affection, Lola expresses it the most, while none of the male characters do. This reflects prior research showing that girls in children's media are typically portrayed as more emotionally expressive and nurturing (Halim et al., 2014).

4.2. Participants' perceptions on gender roles and gender equality

In their responses to the question “*Do you think the relationship between Lola and Charlie is good?*”, both groups provided similarly high ratings, shown in Table 4, with mean scores of 4.13 (younger learners) and 4.03 (older learners), which fall between “Quite a lot” and “A lot”. These findings suggest that age did not influence participants' perceptions of the characters' relationship, indicating a shared understanding and positive evaluation across both age groups.

TABLE 4. ANSWERS TO DO YOU THINK THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LOLA AND CHARLIE IS GOOD?

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Younger group (3rd grade) (n = 23)	4.13	1.14	1	5
Older group (5th and 6th grade) (n = 29)	4.03	0.78	3	5

The responses on gender roles (Appendix B) indicate clear age-related differences, with older children (5th and 6th grade) demonstrating greater awareness of gender roles compared to younger children (3rd grade) (Figure 2). Among younger boys, fewer responses reflected awareness (Type 1), whereas older boys showed a significant increase. Similarly, older girls exhibited higher awareness levels compared to younger girls, who had no Type 1 responses. These findings align with Halim et al. (2014), who found that as children grow older and gain more exposure to social discussions on gender norms, they develop more nuanced gender perspectives. Type 1 responses indicate a conscious recognition and articulation of gender roles, demonstrating that participants are actively processing, questioning, and analysing gendered representations rather than passively accepting them. The finding in this study that older children appear to have more fully developed gender schemas, allowing them to engage with media portrayals more reflectively, can be explained through GST. As children mature, their internal cognitive frameworks (based on socially constructed gender categories) become more elaborate, which influences how they perceive gendered information.

Notably, when comparing Type 2 (reinforcement of gender roles) and Type 3 (challenge to gender roles) responses, there are more Type 3 responses overall, suggesting that participants were more likely to challenge gender stereotypes than reinforce them. This trend suggests that children may recognize and push back against traditional gender norms, and that exposure to counter-stereotypical media representations may contribute

to more flexible gender perceptions (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011), among other societal changes. This flexibility is a key feature of schema development, as children learn to balance observed portrayals with their personal experiences and evolving social understanding.

When comparing boys and girls, a noteworthy difference is observed in the older group, where girls surpassed boys in the number of challenge responses (Type 3), despite being fewer in number (12 vs. 17) (Figure 2). This may suggest that girls develop stronger critical perspectives on gender roles as they grow older. Though the sample is small, these findings highlight that, although both boys and girls become more aware of gender norms over time, older girls appear particularly engaged in challenging traditional representations.

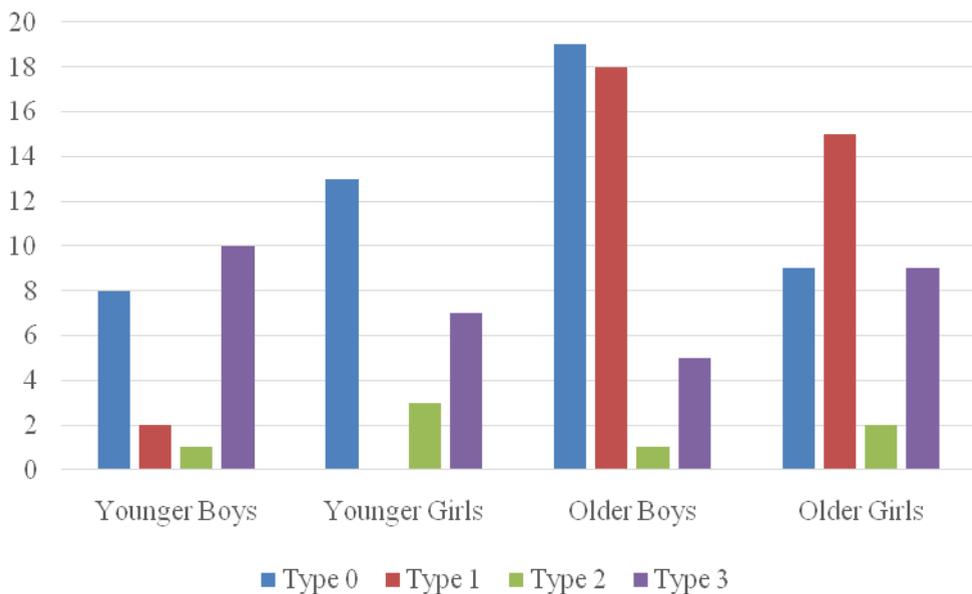


FIGURE 2. RESPONSES ON GENDER ROLES.

As for gender equality (Appendix B), results shown in Figure 3 indicate clear age-related differences in how children perceive gender equality, with older participants demonstrating a more advanced understanding compared to younger participants. Notably, the older group had zero responses in Type 0 (no understanding), suggesting that all older children displayed at least some level of awareness of gender equality. This contrasts with the younger group, where both boys and girls had some Type 0 responses, indicating a lack of understanding of gender equality concepts. The absence of Type 0 responses among older participants suggests that, by this stage, children have developed a foundational awareness of gender issues, likely due to increased exposure

to discussions on gender equality in school, media, or social interactions. As children develop cognitively, their schemas can accommodate more abstract and nuanced information, resulting in more thorough responses.

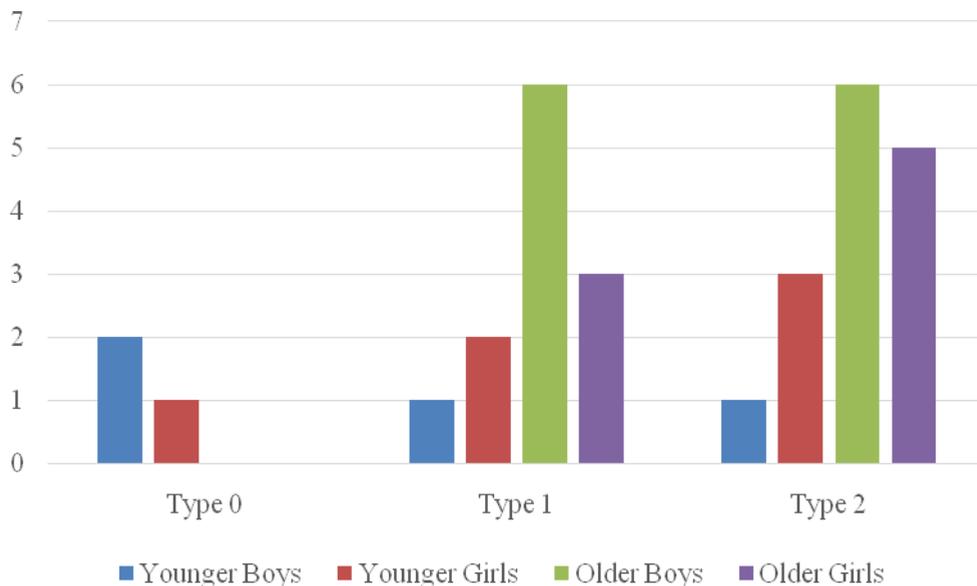


FIGURE 3. RESPONSES TO GENDER EQUALITY.

Furthermore, older participants provided significantly more responses overall compared to younger participants, denoting greater engagement with and understanding of gender equality. The larger number of responses among the older group implies that as children grow older, they are not only more aware of gender equality but also more capable of articulating their perspectives on the topic. This aligns with research by England et al. (2011), which suggests that as children develop cognitively and socially, they are more likely to critically reflect on and discuss gender norms. While younger children may have only a basic or implicit understanding of gender equality, older children are more likely to actively engage with and express opinions about it. This suggests not only increased awareness but also a deeper internalisation of gender-related social knowledge, consistent with GST's claim that gender becomes a salient organising principle in children's cognitive development over time.

When examining gender differences, younger girls provided more responses overall than younger boys, despite being fewer in number. This suggests that younger girls were more actively engaged in discussions about gender equality at this stage. In the older group, although boys contributed more responses in total, a greater proportion of girls

demonstrated advanced understanding (Type 2). This pattern indicates that while both boys and girls develop a stronger awareness of gender equality over time, older girls were found to engage with the topic more critically and in greater depth.

The results align with previous findings on children's increasing awareness of gender norms with age (Halim et al., 2014; Martin & Halverson, 1981), supporting the idea that cognitive development and exposure to social discourse contribute to more reflective gender attitudes. The fact that older children, especially girls, provided more responses challenging gender stereotypes is consistent with studies showing that girls are more likely to critically reflect on social roles when given space to do so (Coyne et al., 2016). While our findings point to age-related differences, these were based on descriptive data, and we recognise that further research with larger samples and inferential statistics would help confirm the robustness of these patterns.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we have analysed gender representation in *Charlie and Lola* through both content analysis and children's perceptions, offering insights into how the show portrays gender roles and how young viewers interpret them. First of all, the findings from the content analysis suggest that while the animated cartoon *Charlie and Lola* includes some traditional gender roles, many of the patterns in behaviours and communication may also stem from the sibling dynamic rather than strictly gender differences. Charlie's dominance in leadership, problem-solving, and rescuing behaviours aligns with certain traditional masculine roles and his role as the older sibling, making it difficult to separate the effects of age from those of gendered portrayals. Nevertheless, Lola's frequent verbal participation, assertiveness, and inquisitiveness challenge typical female stereotypes in animated media. Ultimately, *Charlie and Lola* presents a mix of traditional and progressive gender portrayals, and its sibling-based structure adds complexity to the analysis of gendered behaviours. Secondly, the findings from the post-intervention group interviews reveal notable age-related differences in children's understanding of gender equality, with older participants exhibiting a more developed awareness compared to younger participants. Older participants showed more developed and articulated understandings, with none classified as having no awareness. Notably, older girls, despite being fewer, contributed more responses challenging traditional gender roles and demonstrated a higher proportion of advanced understanding. These findings suggest that gender awareness deepens with age and that girls, in particular, may engage more critically with these issues over time. In this sense, encouraging discussions on gender from an early age in educational settings could play a key role in promoting more equitable attitudes toward gender roles and equality.

While this study provides valuable insights into gender representation in *Charlie and Lola* and how children perceive gender roles and gender equality, several limitations should be acknowledged. As mentioned throughout the study, one key limitation is that

the findings on character behaviours and communication patterns in the cartoon may be influenced not only by gender but also by the sibling dynamic, making it difficult to fully isolate age-related effects from gendered portrayals. Since Charlie, as the older sibling, naturally assumes more leadership and problem-solving roles, it remains unclear whether similar patterns would emerge in a cartoon series with a reversed sibling structure (e.g., an older sister guiding a younger brother). Future research could explore how sibling hierarchies interact with gender portrayals to better distinguish age-based dominance from gender-based dominance.

Another limitation is that this study analysed only 11 episodes, which may not capture the full range of gender portrayals throughout the entire series. Expanding the dataset to include a larger sample of episodes or comparing *Charlie and Lola* with other animated cartoons with different gender dynamics would provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender representations in children's media. Additionally, while this study examined explicit behaviours and communication patterns, it did not analyse more implicit gendered messaging, such as character personality traits, voice tone, or background interactions, which could further shape gender perceptions. Future studies could incorporate qualitative discourse analysis or multimodal analysis, such as examining screen time distribution, visual framing, or implicit gendered messaging in character interactions, to explore gender portrayals that may not be immediately evident through direct observation (in behaviours or communication activities). Regarding children's perceptions, the study relied on group responses, making it difficult to determine individual variations in how children interpret gender roles. Future research could incorporate individual interviews or longitudinal studies to assess how gender awareness develops over time and whether exposure to counter-stereotypical portrayals has long-term effects on children's attitudes toward gender norms.

Finally, while the study found that older children demonstrated greater awareness of gender equality than younger children, it remains unclear whether this awareness translates into behavioural changes or challenges to gender norms in real-life interactions. Future research could examine whether exposure to progressive or counter-stereotypical media leads to measurable shifts in children's gender-related behaviours, aspirations, or general interests. Expanding knowledge in this area would provide a deeper understanding of how media actively contributes to gender socialization and whether interventions in media representation can promote more equitable gender perceptions among young audiences.

These findings have educational implications for both instructive practice and media production. First, for educators, incorporating guided discussions about gender roles in classroom settings can help children critically reflect on stereotypes and develop more equitable perspectives. Since older children in our study were more likely to challenge traditional gender norms, media-based interventions could be developmentally scaffolded and reinforced over time. Then, for media producers, the study highlights the value of portraying a wider range of gendered behaviours and relationships. Creating characters who resist gendered expectations or reversing typical dynamics could contribute to more

balanced and empowering narratives that support children's social development and gender equality awareness.

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Appendix A. Examples of Content Analysis Classification

Behaviours

Category	Example
Show ingenuity	Lola invents a game to avoid eating vegetables.
Show leadership	Lola tells their friends a story and leads them through an enchanted house.
Bravery rescue	Charlie helps Lola catch the spider.
Follow others	Charlie follows Lola when she decides to go back.
Achieve a goal	Lola finds the spider she lost.
Fail at a goal	Lola doesn't get the role she wanted in the school play.
Show physical affection	Lola and Lotta hug each other.
Primp	Lola looks at herself in the mirror and fixes her dress.
Cry	Lola cries when she doesn't get the role she wants.
Obey	Lola listens when Charlie tells her to brush her teeth.

Communication Activities

Category	Example
Ask questions	"Are you going fishing, Lola?"
Answer questions	"No! I'm the SUN!"
Express opinions	"This is my best letter so far."
Brag	"Yes! Sizzles can do anything."
Boss order others	"Lola, stop!"
Threaten others	"Your go, and if you miss that time, I'll be the superstar marble champion."
Receive comment about body/beauty	"It really is a lovely coat."
Make comment about body/ beauty	
Express verbal affection	(Writing a letter) "Love, Lola."

Appendix B. Examples of Children's Perceptions Analysis Classification***Gender Roles***

GR0	Neutral / lack of awareness	<i>Bien porque es el hermano mayor.</i> Good because he is the older brother.
GR1	Reinforcement of gender roles/stereotypes	<i>Un poco sí porque la madre puede estar como en casa cuidando de los niños.</i> A little, yes, because the mother might be at home taking care of the children.
GR2	Challenge to gender roles /stereotypes	<i>Deberían poder ir como quieran, los chicos con falda o pantalón corto.</i> They should be able to dress however they want, boys with skirts or shorts.
GR3	Awareness	<i>Jo hi ha una cosa que no l'entenc... lo de les sabates potser sí, però la roba que fiquen "home" i "dona"...</i> There's something I don't understand... maybe with shoes, but labelling clothes as "men's" and "women's"...

Gender Equality

GE0	No understanding	<i>No sé qué es...</i> I don't know what that is...
GE1	Basic understanding	<i>Que los chicos y las chicas, que hagan lo mismo, que hagan lo que quieran.</i> That boys and girls should do the same things, that they should do whatever they want.
GE2	Advanced understanding	<i>Es que haya las mismas oportunidades para los chicos y para las chicas. No puede ser que una chica imagine diga hay un mundial en fútbol y el mundial de fútbol es reconocido por todo el mundo, pero la FIFA no quiere comprar el de chicas para reproducirlo en la TV.</i> It means having the same opportunities for boys and girls. It can't be that, for example, a girl says, "There's a World Cup in football," and while the men's World Cup is recognized worldwide, FIFA doesn't want to buy the rights to broadcast the women's tournament on TV.