The Impact of Queer Representation in Animation:
Children's Perceptions of Gender and Understanding of Diversity

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Abstract

From colorful childhood cartoons to intricately animated films, animation plays a crucial role in shaping children's minds and worldviews. Recent increases in LGBTQ+ representation in children's animated movies and media have promoted inclusivity, yet they have sparked debate about the age appropriateness of such portrayals. While existing research has addressed the media's impact on children's views of gender roles and stereotypes, studies specifically examining queer representation in animation remain limited. This gap in the research highlights the need for further exploration of queer representation in animation and its influence on children's perceptions of diversity. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing children's views on gender and diversity regarding queer representations in American and Japanese animation created between 2014 and 2024, a period that highlights the rise of LGBTQ+ representation in children's media. The study employed a qualitative approach involving 15 students from Hong Kong to explore their perspectives on the topic. It featured visual stimuli of LGBTQ+ followed by semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted, utilizing transcriptions and coding to identify key themes, along with supporting quotes, within the context of the existing literature. The findings contribute to the development of animation that fosters positive audience attitudes toward gender diversity and promotes a more inclusive society by examining how viewers perceive and understand these representations.

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Introduction

Animation plays a significant role in children's lives, offering valuable lessons and cultural messages through visual storytelling. They spend an enormous amount of time watching animated content, which shapes their understanding of complex social concepts such as gender and diversity (Chakravorty & Tilak, 2021; Magotra & Kaur, 2018). Ahmed and Wahab (2014) noted that animated materials contribute to children's socialization (p. 44). Since children relate easily to animated characters, these figures can serve as positive role models for them. However, gender portrayals are often stereotypical, with male characters depicted as active and adventurous, while female characters are shown as passive and focused on appearance and domestic roles (Wood, 1994, p. 32), which can limit perceptions of human potential.

Media influence our lives, and their misrepresentation of genders can distort self-perception and what people perceive as usual and desirable for men and women (Wood, 1994). Nevertheless, in recent decades, animated media have increasingly featured queer representation (Whitley-Berry, 2021). This shift presents both opportunities and challenges. Some scholars claim that inclusive representation can normalize diverse identities and foster empathy (Van Wichelen et al., 2024), while others argue that limited or stereotypical portrayals may reinforce harmful biases. According to a study by Gökçearslan (2010), animated movies and cartoons are not only a source of entertainment for children but also have educational aspects. The study indicated that cartoons can subtly convey negative messages, including those related to gender. Homosexual characters have become more prominent in children's movies and cartoons over the years (Von Sikorski et al., 2022).

Animation, as a popular mode of entertainment for young audiences (Magotra & Kaur, 2018), possesses a unique potential to influence children's understanding of gender norms and diversity. A Business Insider report noted the growing presence of queer characters in children's cartoons, highlighting 70 programs with 259 characters of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, marking a 222% increase in LGBTQ+ characters from 2017 to 2019 (White & Kalai, 2021). Queer representations include LGBTQ+ characters and themes in animated media (Green, 2013). Additionally, Gökçearslan (2010) noted that media have a significant influence on children's internalization of gender stereotypes. Many children's shows reinforce gender discrimination, with examples such as *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (Ruby et al., 1969–present), and *Super Mario* (Nintendo, 1985) often portraying female characters as needing rescue, which upholds the stereotype of women as helpless (Derr, 2020; Inness, 2007). Children are highly receptive to the messages conveyed through media, especially animation, which they consume regularly. Van Evra (2004) stated that media significantly shape children's attitudes, beliefs, and values. Media play a crucial role in shaping youngsters' minds, particularly young children and teenagers (Chassiakos et al., 2016).

This study investigates the impact of queer representation in animation on children's perceptions of gender and diversity. It focuses on how the rising visibility of queer characters in animated content influences young audiences concerning gender identities and sexual orientations. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research highlights the role of inclusive storytelling in cultivating empathy, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging inclusivity among young viewers.

Literature Review

Animated films influence the cognitive and social development of young audiences (Gökçearslan, 2010). Their narratives, characterizations, and voice performances convey societal constructs of gender and diversity (Zaheen, 2020). However, scholarship has mainly focused on gender stereotypes and binary representations in this genre. This oversight leaves a gap in the literature regarding the impact of queer representation on children's perceptions of gender diversity. This section examines the existing literature on queer representation, children's views on gender, and media diversity, highlighting the need for further research on how queer representation in animation affects children.

Queer Characters in Animation

Animation has long been perceived as an art form intended for children, and it has a history of association with "queerness" (Johnson, 2010). Dennis (2003) suggested that while early animation often relied on subtle coding to represent homosexuality, recent years have witnessed a shift toward more explicit portrayals. Modern animators can openly depict same-sex desire and gay characters even when such themes are subtle. They can express underlying wishes and fears about same-sex identity. Dhaenens and Van Bauwel argued that, despite often reinforcing heteronormativity, adult animated sitcoms create space for queer resistance through techniques such as exaggeration and intertextuality (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2011). These strategies gradually expose and disrupt normative patterns, enabling more inclusive attitudes.

As Griffin (2017) discussed, animation's inherent "queerness" lies in its ability to transform characters and parody norms, destabilizing fixed identities. The understanding of this "queerness" evolves (Sadiq & Baghavandoss, 2024), and animation can help break down the barriers between traditional heterosexual norms and other forms of relationships (De Beer, 2014). Scholarship, such as Saint-Oyant's work, explores how animation techniques create narratives that challenge heteronormative norms (Saint-Oyant, 2017). Further research is needed to understand the impact of these representations, particularly on children, and this area deserves greater attention.

Children's Views on Gender

Theories of gender development examine how individuals acquire and internalize gender roles through socialization processes. Eisenberg et al. (2013) reviewed major approaches to gender development in psychology: biological, learning-based, and cognitive. The learning-based and cognitive approaches led to two key theories—social learning theory and cognitive-developmental theory. Social learning theory suggests that children learn gender roles through observation and reinforcement (Perry & Bussey, 1979). In contrast, Kohlberg (1966) proposed that children actively construct their understanding of gender in stages, leading to a stable gender identity and identification with their gender.

Children's understanding of gender is a multifaceted developmental process shaped by various influences. Research has shown that children's understanding of gender is heavily influenced by the media they consume, particularly animation (Stockton, 2009). Since children begin to spend considerable time watching animated films and cartoons from a very young age, gender representation in children's animated movies warrants significant attention. Batool et al. (2017) noted that children have a keen understanding of how gender is

categorized in animation. The authors elaborated that portraying gender roles in animated works can shape their beliefs, ideologies, opinions, and concepts regarding social norms, relationships, and behaviors (De Carvalho Baptista, 2020; Martin et al., 2002; Oliver & Green, 2001).

Representations of Diversity in Animation and Media

Animation uniquely expresses human experiences, emotions, ideas, and aspirations through an exaggerated style (Karmakar, 2021). Its unconventional techniques challenge traditional gender roles and offer diverse representations that can positively influence children's views.

Children absorb gender stereotypes from animated films from a young age (Magotra & Kaur, 2018). While many reinforce traditional roles, some characters defy the norms of gender identity and presentation (Thulasi, 2022). Animation can both affirm and disrupt conventional gender understandings. Patterson and Spencer (2017) noted, "Far too often, these films teach children to internalize oppressive messages, which they carry with them (largely unchanged) into adulthood" (p. 73). The effects of queer representation in animation on children's perceptions of gender and diversity are underexplored.

Although research has looked at media's influence on children's views of gender roles and stereotypes (Kimmie, 2024; Knobloch et al., 2005; Zuckerman et al., 1980), studies on queer representation in animation are scarce. This gap highlights the need for further exploration of how queer representation affects children's perceptions of diversity. Hence, this study focused on the following three key research questions (**RQs**):

    RQ1: How does animation play a crucial role in children's understanding of gender and diversity?

    RQ2: How do young children perceive queer characters in animation?

    RQ3: How can we positively influence young individuals' perspectives on queer characters?

Research Methodology

Methods

Visual Qualitative Research Methodology

This study used an interpretive methodology focusing on the meaning of queer representations in children's animation. To answer the research questions (RQs), a visual qualitative research methodology was applied, involving visual elicitation interviews to understand children's perspectives and gather data. These methods provided a thorough understanding of the project's complexities. Elbardan and Kholeif (2017) noted that interpretivism seeks to understand the meanings behind the data regarding a phenomenon and the attitudes of individuals within a social context. Supporters argue that interpretive approaches recognize that reality is socially constructed through interpretations of events (Putnam & Banghart, 2017). Kamenou (2007) emphasized that unique experiences and cultural contexts shape the understanding of gender and diversity. An interpretive approach examines the perceptions and emotions associated with experiences, influenced by culture and societal context, thereby fostering deeper discussions on gender and diversity. Through visual elicitation interviews, the visual qualitative methodology aims to achieve the project's objectives and effectively address the three key research questions.

Interview Framework

The research interview framework included three main phases.

Phase 1 - Preparation

This research in Hong Kong explored how children's perceptions of queer identity are shaped by animation. Ethical approval was secured, and participants were recruited through purposive sampling to gather a self-selecting sample of informed volunteers (Blaxter et al., 1996). An interview guide was developed, and 15 students, primarily aged 6–11, participated, alongside older children (aged 12–16). The study emphasized media's influence during critical periods of social understanding and media literacy development, especially regarding gender roles, highlighting this age range's importance in forming inclusive attitudes (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004; Strasburger et al., 2014).

This study aimed to include "cisgender" children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in Hong Kong to avoid bias (Aultman, 2014), recognizing the influence of socioeconomic status and family dynamics on perceptions of LGBTQ+ representation (McHale et al., 2003; Nikken & Opree, 2018). Sensitive topics, such as family income, were addressed with proxy measurements. Eleven stimuli (see Appendix A) were selected by an animation studies scholar, with a focus on American and Japanese animations from 2014 to 2024, a period noted for increased LGBTQ+ representation (Cruz, 2024). A semi-structured interview guide designed for child comprehension was utilized (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017).

Phase 2 - Data Collection

Interview sessions were conducted with primary and secondary school students for data collection. In total, 15 interviews were conducted with 13 boys, aged 6 to 16, and 2 girls, aged 10 and 12. The 12-year-old girl is a Filipino who has been studying and living in Hong Kong since the beginning of her primary school education. Interviewees aged 12 or older were classified as older children for comparison. Two pairs of identified siblings were included. The participants were interviewed via Zoom, individually by availability and willingness, except for siblings, who were interviewed together. This arrangement allowed both children to interact, further investigating their reactions to and perceptions of messages.

Visual stimuli included clips of 1–2 minutes, GIFs, and still images featuring LGBTQ+ characters and those in same-sex relationships. Stimuli of characters challenging gender norms through their appearance or behavior were also included. These were presented one by one, followed by semi-structured interviews with open-ended, child-friendly questions. Follow-up questions further investigated responses. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes to keep the children engaged and prevent weariness.

The interview questions (see Appendix B) focused on understanding how media and animation influence children's perceptions. The questions were about favorite cartoons and their connections to real life, as well as children's reactions to queer representations in animated media. Additionally, it explored children's views on gender, diversity, and inclusion, as well as how animation can foster positive attitudes toward these topics.

Phase 3 - Data Analysis and Interpretation

The findings were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). The process began with transcribing the recorded interviews for an accurate textual record. Next, a coding scheme was developed based on the three RQs. The transcripts were coded for recurring themes, patterns, and key concepts related to children's perceptions of queer representation. Subsequently, similar codes were grouped into broader themes that captured vital patterns and interpretations of the data. The final analysis was clarified by revisiting the written pieces and transcripts. The results were shared with the participants and, if applicable, their parents, to ensure they reflected the participants' perspectives and to consider any disconfirming evidence. An interpretive approach revealed general perceptions about the central theme and allowed for specific thematization of certain influences expressed by the children. We identified mixed responses and uncertainties in the younger children's answers. These findings will be discussed in the following section.

Findings

Shifting Media Consumption: Animation, Gaming, and the Digital Landscape

A phenomenon of media multitasking and displacement was observed in the participants' viewing habits. Most of the children watched cartoons regularly, with their preferences varying from daily viewing to less frequent watching due to other interests and schoolwork. One hobby that the children frequently mentioned was video gaming. When asked how often they watched cartoons or animated shows, those who responded less often indicated that they watched less animation as they spent more time playing video games, such as *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (Greene & Tae-seok, 2017) and *Roblox* (Baszucki & Cassel, 2006). Most of the children watched animations on various media platforms, including streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube, instead of traditional TV programs.

Character Identification and Role Models

This theme examined how the children identified with animated characters and how these characters served as role models in shaping their understanding of gender and diversity. The children were drawn to characters for various reasons, including personality and magical traits, with popular examples being *Nezha*, *Captain America*, and *Super Mario*. The older children often connected their favorite characters to family memories. For example, one 12-year-old boy enjoyed playing *Super Mario* for fun, which he shared with his cousin, while a girl respondent appreciated *Tyke* from *Tom and Jerry* (Hanna & Barbera, 1940-present) for its portrayal of a familial bond, which she found very touching.

The children differentiated between cartoon characters and real-life individuals based on traits and abilities. For example, a 10-year-old noted, "*Buzz Lightyear* in *Toy Story* (Lasseter, 1995) is different because he has a laser gun and wings." Positive and negative role models affected children's attitudes. Another 10-year-old child mentioned *Nezha*, explaining that he saw him as "naught" and impulsive, while *Ao Bing* was calm. He also commented that a classmate who imitated *Nezha* left him with a negative impression. The children's views on the importance of representation varied. Some found it unimportant, while others appreciated relatable traits. The older children generally valued it more; for instance, one 12-year-old boy stated, "If a character's personality is similar to mine, I would like to watch it even more." A

12-year-old girl added, "I can relate to it, which brings me comfort." A 16-year-old boy noted, "If a character resembles me, I would feel a stronger connection and like them more."

On the other hand, the role of representation in fostering inclusivity was significant. Half (50%) of the interviewees expressed curiosity, indicating a desire to connect with the characters in the clips—specifically, *Given* (Yamaguchi, 2019), which features a childhood montage of the protagonist and deuteragonist, Uenoyama and Sato, growing up and supporting each other—and they wanted to befriend the characters.

Initial Reactions and Understanding of Queer Representations

Most of the younger participants expressed uncertainty about diverse characters in the narratives, labeling them as "strange" or "weird." This reaction is illustrated by three examples: 1) watching *Luca* (Casarosa, 2021), the children found the sea monster transformations unsettling; 2) watching *Steven Universe* (Sugar, 2013–2019), the children struggled to identify the gender of the lesbian humanoid beings Ruby and Sapphire; and 3) watching *When Queer Eye met Big Mouth* (Flackett et al., 2019), the children disliked the portrayal of the boys' team (gay portrayal) due to their unattractive design and behavior.

Emotional connections to "unusual" characters differed notably between the age groups. The older children consistently engaged, while the younger ones exhibited a divide—some were curious and asked questions about the characters. In contrast, others preferred to maintain their distance and did not relate to the characters socially.

For instance, only 22% of the young children expressed a desire for connection, while others displayed indifference or discomfort. Most of the younger participants were unable to identify these as queer representations. They often showed fear and discomfort toward the characters due to their unusual traits. When asked about the characters' feelings, their responses were brief and lacked detail. Some of the young children exhibited openness to different identities, especially in positive contexts such as weddings, as seen in *Steven Universe*, when they erroneously perceived Ruby and Sapphire as a boy and a girl.

In contrast, the older children tended to demonstrate a greater acceptance of queer representations. They found the characters in *When Queer Eye met Big Mouth* hilarious, with one stating, "I really like this. I used to watch them all the time. They were hilarious and chaotic."

When discussing same-sex relationships, particularly the lesbian wedding in *Steven Universe*, the older children showed more empathy and support. They collectively agreed that "same-sex relationships are normal in modern societies" and that "love is love," as expressed by a 12-year-old boy and girl, respectively. Overall, the older children tended to approach the narratives with an open mindset, emphasizing that stories are acceptable as long as they are coherent and well-told.

One notable case involved a 10-year-old girl who was initially uncomfortable with queer representations. However, she loved *The Owl House* (Terrace, 2020–2023), an animated series on the Disney Channel featuring a lesbian character, mainly for its magical elements and character design. She had almost finished the entire series and eagerly shared its storyline, recommending it to her friends.

Children's Understanding of Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion

In terms of gender roles, both the older and younger children recognized the physiological differences between males and females but believed that they could perform many of the same tasks, reflecting a progressive viewpoint. Additionally, the younger children often preferred traditionally strong or familiar characters that aligned with societal expectations of gender and power. This was evident in their choices from the visual stimuli—*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (Stevenson, 2018–2020)—with most selecting *Bow*, a black soldier in a golden suit.

When it came to family definitions, the responses varied. The younger children often defined family as just parents, while some included grandparents, reflecting a broader understanding of family structures. Traditional and evolving views coexisted, with many of the children recognizing the importance of support systems. After watching a clip from *The Loud House* (Savino, 2016–present) featuring a gay interracial couple, reactions were mixed. The younger children recognized same-sex relationships but found them strange. Conversely, the older children once again demonstrated greater acceptance, defining "family" with a more profound perspective, focusing on a psychological level. Two 12-year-olds claimed, "A family requires two individuals and a child, with both individuals needing to care for the child with their heart actively, and it is important to allow the child to grow up happily," and "A family needs two role models and caregivers, as well as a younger one who requires care." A 16-year-old boy expressed:

> The definition of family does not necessarily entail biological ties; instead, it is based on intimate relationships characterized by mutual dependence, trust, support, and shared memories. Even if individuals are nominally considered family, a distant relationship may lead them to not feel like a cohesive family unit. Moreover, partners can be regarded as a family unit even in the absence of children.

He advocated for the inclusion of diverse characters in film and television, such as those from LGBTQ and different racial backgrounds, provided that their presence did not disrupt the narrative and was not merely for the sake of inclusion. In addition, he opposed the intentional alteration of existing character settings for the sake of political correctness, arguing that such changes can create a sense of inauthenticity for the audience. Diverse characters contributed to the expression of various perspectives, allowing more individuals to understand their stories.

Regarding the acceptance of differences, 29% of the participants preferred similarities among peers and felt uncomfortable with diversity. However, most were willing to embrace it, highlighting the importance of social integration. Concerning representation, 50% of the young children wanted to see characters like themselves in animations, although this desire often came with a fear of being different. The other half showed less interest in representation.

The older children had a solid view of the desire for representation. One participant noted, "If a cartoon character's personality is similar to mine, I prefer to watch it," while another mentioned the comfort found in relatable characters. Additionally, the 12-year-old Filipino girl discussed how animation can impact diversity and inclusion, sharing her experience with friends facing unfair issues in Hong Kong:

Animation can inspire minorities by showing relatable struggles on screen. Seeing someone else take a stand can motivate them to stop accepting disrespect while also humbling those who perpetrate it.

Overall, she believed that animation could empower marginalized groups to courageously resist injustice and educate those who discriminate, ultimately changing perceptions and behaviors. Moreover, she emphasized the significance of encountering characters like oneself and understanding diverse cultures.

Discussion

This study focused on children in Hong Kong, a city where "East meets West." Hong Kong's unique and distinctive geographical, cultural, and historical characteristics, especially its openness and Western influence, make it a unique place for exporting cartoons and animations (Wong, 2002). The study highlights the impact of positive exposure to cartoons and character identification on children's perceptions of gender and diversity, thereby contributing to an understanding of media's role in shaping these viewpoints.

Hong Kong's blend of Western and Eastern animation exposes children to a diverse range of storytelling and cultural styles. Parents play a crucial role in shaping their children's mindsets and values. Traditional Chinese values influence views on gender and sexuality, particularly regarding family structures and the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. In the present study, reactions to a clip from *The Loud House* showed that younger children typically view a family as consisting of parents, sometimes including grandparents, and find same-sex relationships unusual. They may internalize societal pressures for traditional family structures, which can conflict with representations of LGBTQ+ characters in animation. In contrast, older children exhibit greater acceptance, indicating a shift among some Hong Kong parents toward progressive views. However, it is important to note that while children may accept queer characters, their understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation remains limited.

The linguistic landscape of Hong Kong, with its blend of Cantonese and English, influences children's understanding of gender and sexuality. In the current study, most of the visual stimuli were presented in English and Japanese, with some also featuring Chinese subtitles. During the interviews, the children exhibited hesitation, often struggling to comprehend the content. Access to appropriate terminology is essential for understanding these concepts, as a lack of precise language can lead to misunderstandings. Cultural connotations also affect interpretations; neutral terms in English may carry negative connotations in Cantonese. Children often navigate discussions by code-switching between languages, which impacts their comfort and comprehension. Accurate and culturally sensitive representations of queer identities in subtitles and dubbing are crucial for helping children in Hong Kong accept diverse identities.

The study observed a phenomenon of media multitasking and displacement in viewing habits. Children nowadays consume animation on various platforms, including Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube, instead of via traditional TV, while also engaging with video games such as *PUBG: Battlegrounds* and *Roblox*. This shift underscores the importance of animation being accessible across multiple platforms to reach young audiences effectively. The quantity and types of media children consume can have significant implications for their understanding of gender and sexuality. As children grow older, they gain greater autonomy in their media

choices. While parents still exert influence, children begin to discover content and platforms through their peers, online recommendations, and self-exploration, and older children engage with a broad variety of media platforms.

Preferences for specific genres of animation, such as action, comedy, and fantasy, vary among children. Media streaming platforms, such as Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube, provide on-demand access to a vast library of shows, movies, and animations. They also use algorithms to recommend content, which can significantly shape viewing habits. YouTube is extremely popular among children as it provides access to user-generated content, short-form videos, and channels dedicated to animation and gaming. In addition to emerging streaming services, video games are a significant form of media consumption for many children, as shown by the results of this study. Games often incorporate narrative elements and character development, which can influence perceptions of gender and diversity.

Three of the participants' favorite characters from the interviews were *Captain America*, *Nezha*, and *Super Mario*. The analysis of the younger participants' perceptions focused on the characteristics, motivations, and relationships of many of the characters. Moreover, as they read the narratives—the stories—these characters were involved in, they tended to relate to some of them, imagining their own lives as a mirror of the characters' experiences or as an outcome of their dreams. In many cases, the characters influenced how the children thought and acted. This profound understanding of character enhances the quality of reading and represents the essence of growth and maturity.

Cognitive and social developmental factors may explain the observed differences between younger and older children. The findings indicate that younger participants often perceive diverse characters in narratives as "strange" or "weird," reflecting their mixed feelings toward queer representations. Additionally, they struggle to understand gender identity and tend to dislike certain portrayals. Emotional connections to these characters vary by age; younger children may display curiosity or discomfort, while older children generally show greater acceptance and empathy. Older children can find humor in queer representations and recognize that same-sex relationships are normal. Their more developed theory of mind aids them in understanding different perspectives, whereas younger children may find it challenging to see that queer individuals have experiences that differ from their own.

These results clearly demonstrate that children's cognitive development evolves as they age, particularly in abstract thinking related to gender perception (Kohlberg, 1966). Older children are better equipped to understand complex ideas such as gender identity and sexual orientation. In contrast, younger children often struggle with these concepts due to a focus on concrete thinking and literal interpretations.

The context in which queer characters are set in animation—taking into account elements such as storylines, secondary characters, and general messaging—can significantly influence children's perceptions of queer identities. Thus, emergent work can begin to explore the specific contexts surrounding queer representation that foster either positive or contradictory understandings of queerness. Positive contexts and familiarity play a significant role in facilitating greater acceptance among younger children. As reflected in the results, positive contexts, such as weddings, make same-sex relationships more understandable for children and serve as affirmations. Despite the children's misunderstanding of gender identifications, the wedding scene from *Steven Universe* (Sugar, 2013–2019) suggested that framing same-sex relationships within established, positive social rituals can enhance acceptance.

Additionally, the present study suggested that repeated exposure to LGBTQ+ characters and stories can help mitigate discomfort and promote inclusivity. The case of the 10-year-old girl who liked *The Owl House* but was also negative on other queer characters might explain that by the time children have had the opportunity to be exposed to LGBTQ+/queer characters and stories over and over, they become more familiar with them as representations, and this mitigates any affront to their sense of strangeness or discomfort. It is important that we continue to expose children to diversity so that it becomes an integral part of how they view the world. Moreover, the more children hear these characters and stories, the better they will come to understand that people, even if they may be different in specific ways, share more similarities than differences, thus prompting them to think inclusively.

These findings have several practical and theoretical implications for animation and media production. First, creators should strive for nuanced portrayals of queer characters and avoid harmful stereotypes. Instead of reducing characters to their sexual orientation or gender identity, it is essential to depict them as complex individuals with diverse personalities and backgrounds. Second, placing queer characters in everyday scenarios promotes a culture that embraces diversity, enabling audiences to see themselves reflected in the stories they encounter. Ultimately, empowering marginalized communities through inspiring narratives is vital in combating injustice and discrimination. These stories can illustrate pathways to a more just society while promoting resilience and advocacy. Increased representation of women and minorities in higher industry positions is essential, supported by opportunities that uplift diverse talent and address unfair hiring practices. This emphasis on inclusion, accessibility, and representation not only benefits the animation industry but also enriches its depiction of society. This study contributes to theories of media effects and social learning by underscoring how media consumption shapes children's attitudes toward gender and diversity. It reinforces the idea that positive representation and repeated exposure can foster greater acceptance and understanding.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of queer representation in animation on children's perceptions of gender and their understanding of diversity. The findings suggest that while younger children may initially struggle to understand queer identities, older children generally demonstrate greater acceptance and empathy. It shows that being mature and understanding can lead to increased acceptance of diverse identities. This suggests that exposure to queer representation in animation can play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity and empathy among children as they grow and develop their understanding of the world. Furthermore, positive contexts and increased familiarity with queer characters can facilitate greater understanding among younger audiences. Additionally, animation has the potential to shape children's worldviews, challenge gender stereotypes, and promote inclusivity.

The findings of this study are manifestly limited due to the relatively small sample size (15 students). The focus was restricted to Hong Kong, potentially failing to represent children from other cultural background contexts. In addition, although the qualitative approach provides abundant insights, it may not be generalizable to larger populations. Furthermore, there was a marked imbalance in the gender representation of the participants, with 13 boys and only two girls. This skewed distribution raises concerns that the findings may disproportionately reflect the perspectives and experiences of boys in Hong Kong, potentially leading to bias in the results. It is plausible that girls' perspectives on queer representation in animation may differ significantly from those of boys. Future research should address these

limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, as well as considering the use of quantitative methods to further examine the topic. Prolonged studies could investigate the long-term effects of exposure to queer characters on children's identity development and social perspectives. It is also necessary to explore the role of parental mediation, cultural context, and specific animation techniques in shaping children's perceptions of queer representation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Animated Movies and Cartoons for Stimulus Selection

Table A1

List of Potential Animated Movies and Cartoons for the Visual Elicitation Interviews

	Movie/Cartoon Title (Country)	**Year(s)**	**Character(s)**	**Creator(s)**
1.	**Adventure Time** (US)	2010–2018	Marceline and Princess Bubblegum	Pendleton Ward
2.	**Steven Universe** (US)	2013–2019	Ruby and Sapphire	Rebecca Sugar
3.	**The Loud House** (US)	2016–Present	Howard and Harold McBride	Chris Savino
4.	**Yuri!!! On Ice** (JPN)	2016	Victor Nikiforov and Yuri Katsuki	Sayo Yamamoto and Mitsurō Kubo
5.	**She-Ra and the Princesses of Power** (US)	2018–2020	Adora, Bow, and Sea Hawk	Nate Stevenson (Original by Larry DiTillio and J. Michael Straczynski)
6.	**Given** (JPN)	2019	Mafuyu Sato and Ritsuka Uenoyama	Hikaru Yamaguchi
7.	**When Queer Eye met Big Mouth** (US)	2019	The Fab 5	Jennifer Flackett, Andrew Goldberg, and Nick Kroll
8.	**Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina** (JPN)	2020	Elaina and Saya	Jougi Shiraishi
9.	**The Owl House** (US)	2020–2023	Luz and Amity	Dana Terrace
10.	**Luca** (US)	2021	Luca and Alberto	Enrico Casarosa
11.	**Look Back** (JPN)	2024	Fujino and Kyomoto	Kiyotaka Oshiyama (Original by Tatsuki Fujimoto)

Note. Only American and Japanese animated movies and cartoons created between 2014 and 2024 were considered within the scope of the study.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Table B1

List of Interview Questions for the Visual Elicitation Interviews

	RQ1: How does media, especially animation, play a crucial role in children's understanding of gender and diversity?
Q.	
1	你多久會看卡通或動畫節目？ How often do you watch cartoons or animated shows?
2	你最喜歡的卡通或動畫電影是什麼？為什麼喜歡它們？ What are your favorite cartoons or animated movies? Why do you like them?
3	告訴我一個你特別喜歡的卡通角色！他們有什麼特別之處 Tell me about a cartoon character you really, really like! What makes them so cool?
4	所有卡通角色都看起來一樣嗎？還是彼此之間有不同的地方？怎麼不同？ Do all cartoon characters look the same? Or are they different from each other? How?
5	你認為卡通裡發生的事情像現實生活嗎？為什麼或為什麼不？ Do you think the things that happen in cartoons are like real life? Why or why not?
6	你覺得在卡通和電影中看到像你的人重要嗎？為什麼？ Is seeing people like you in cartoons and movies important? Why?
	RQ2: How do young children perceive queer characters in animation?
Q.	
7	這個片段/圖片在表達什麼？ What's happening in this clip/picture?
8	你對這個角色有什麼看法？ 你喜歡他們嗎？ What do you think about this character? Do you like them?
9	你認為這個角色在想什麼？ How do you think this character is feeling?
10	這個角色/這些角色有什麼不同或獨特的地方嗎？ Is there anything different or unique about this character/these characters?
11	如果你可以問這個角色一個問題，你會問什麼？ If you could ask this character one question, what would it be?
12	這個角色讓你想起你認識的任何人嗎 Does this character remind you of anyone you know?

	RQ3: How can we to positively influence young individuals' perspectives on queer characters?
Q.	
13	你認為有哪些事情只有男孩/女孩可以做嗎？ Are there things that only boys/girls can do?
14	你有沒有見過有人因為與他人不同而受到不公平對待？發生了什麼事？ Have you ever seen someone being treated unfairly because they were different? What happened?
15	你認為家庭的定義是什麼？ What do you think makes a family?
16	誰在你的家庭中照顧你？是你的媽媽/爸爸嗎？也許你的奶奶或爺爺也有幫助？誰愛你並幫助你成長？ Who takes care of you in your family? Is it your mom/dad? Maybe your grandma or grandpa helps too? Who loves you and helps you grow up?
17	人們不同是很酷的嗎？　還是每個人都應該一樣？ Is it cool for people to be different? Or should everyone be the same?
18	你有沒有遇到過和你不同的同學或朋友？那是什麼樣的感覺？ Have you ever met some classmates or friends different from you? What was that like?
19	你想在動畫中看到一個和你相似的角色嗎？為什麼？ Do you want to see a character similar to you in the animation? Why?
20	你認為每個人都在卡通和電影中看到像他們的人重要嗎？ Is it important for everyone to see people like them in cartoons and movies?

Note. Different sets of questions were developed for the interviews, tailored to the specific research questions (RQ). These questions were created in a bilingual format to enhance the children's understanding.