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Marxist analysis of social and economic narratives in childrens' cartoons

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Marxist analysis of social and economic narratives in children's cartoons

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Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education
in the College of Education

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Using a Marxist framework with a grounding in critical literacy, this study employs a content analysis methodology to analyze 25 episodes of five of the most popular children's television cartoons in order to understand how these cartoons portray economic and social systems, as well as how the messages these cartoons express would tend to support these systems. In so doing, this research hopes to provide a conceptual framework that educators and parents can use as a guide for demonstration of a critical approach to understanding the curriculum of children's media inside or outside of the classroom. Educators can modify this framework to suit the age of the children that they are working with or to better align with the characteristics of the text their students are consuming.

While this research may be used as a guide by educators, it is also a comprehensive Marxist analysis of some of the most popular cartoons targeted to pre-school aged children. Analysis of the data indicates these cartoons support a capitalist ideology through the expression of a particular worldview and associated values, which include normalizing authoritarian relationships, promoting consumerism and entrepreneurship, supporting beliefs about work that employers would value, and other views that tend to be valued in a capitalist system.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents Arvie and Jamye, who were always there when I needed them. And to my children Mary Jane, Kaden, Eliza, Millie, and Tabitha, who make it all worthwhile.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Scene: A demolished cartoon castle. The walls are unfinished; the moat is only half full; the parapets are incomplete. Fluff-filled workers are milling around, accomplishing little. One pair of workers are struggling to hammer the crooked drawbridge in place while another worker shouts conflicting directions to them. Other workers are relaxing in the moat complaining about the heat while another struggles to set a heavy stone in its place on the wall. Surveying the chaotic scene, the Wicked King shakes his bowed, crowned head. Earlier in the day he told the Queen that she was too bossy. The word brought tears to her eyes, and she picked up her things and quietly left the demolished castle to him and the workers. Suddenly, around the corner Doc and the Queen appear. The King looks up as Doc reprimands him for hurting the Queen's feelings. She explains, "You guys hurt Queen Amina's feelings when you called her bossy."

The Wicked King responds, "It wasn't my intention to hurt her feelings. But she was, oh what's the word... bossing us around."

Doc McStuffins retorts, "Bossy isn't a nice thing to call someone. And what I see Queen Amina doing is being a great leader."

During the exchange between Doc and the Wicked King, one of the workers named Lambie approaches and asserts, "She's an amazing leader! Just like Doc, I mean, look what happened when she wasn't there to tell us what to do."

Wicked King mumbles dejectedly, "Well, I hadn't thought of it that way."

Stepping aside, the Wicked King apologizes to Queen Amina and asks her if she would return to her leadership position in rebuilding the castle. The Queen accepts his apology with a smile and quickly begins issuing directives to him, Lambie, and the other workers. In no time at all, the castle is restored to its previous glory, with Doc, the royal couple, and the fluff-filled workers bursting out in song praising the leadership of Queen Amina.

Stories, like the one above from *Doc McStuffins*, that I watched with my children, shape how we understand the world. I recognized the narratives present in the program and wondered if other programs or episodes have narratives that might be similar, because I know that the more often that we hear a story, the more likely we are to have our worldview shaped by the curriculum expressed by the story. That curriculum can represent a pedagogy that reinforces oppression, or it can serve as a pedagogy that supports freedom. From a Marxist perspective, stories that reinforce capitalist ideology and the values associated with that ideology—individualism, authoritarianism, materialism—can be considered to be oppressive narratives, while stories that express values counter to capitalist ideology—collectivism, democracy, altruism—are narratives that support freedom (Freire, 1970).

The stories presented in the children's cartoon *Doc McStuffins* are targeted to a young audience, anywhere from 3-8 years old. Many beliefs about the world are being formed during those years and cartoon media plays a role in shaping those beliefs for many children (Jordan, 2004). In the story above we observe two distinct narratives, one overt and one implied. The overt narrative represents an expression of equity most often associated with liberal ideology. In the series, Doc Mcstuffins, a young black female, aspires to become a medical doctor like her black mother. Traditionally, black and female characters have been relegated to jobs outside of STEM fields. This cartoon challenges the idea that black females lack the interest or the ability

to succeed as medical doctors. A similar positioning is seen in this episode with Queen Amina (known as Sparkly Queen of the World in some episodes) and the Wicked King. While both characters are sometimes presented with negative character traits, differences in the names of the two characters indicate a continued emphasis on gender equity, with the male King lacking an actual name, only being referred to as the Wicked King. The cartoon places the Queen in a position of leadership over the project of rebuilding the castle, a role that might have stereotypically been seen as the role for a male character. In this role, she is depicted as confident and capable until the Wicked King comments that she is being bossy, which may be seen as a reflection of real workplaces where women in positions of power are seen as having more negative dispositions than men in similar positions of power. The overt message of female empowerment continues with Doc McStuffins intervening on behalf of the Queen repositioning her as a great and capable leader. Finally, the episode closes with everyone singing the song, “She’s not bossy. She’s the Boss!”, which serves to further communicate the message that females in charge are not bossy but are natural leaders that should be respected and confidently followed.

While the overt messages in this episode are generally about gender equity, the implicit messages serve to normalize authoritarian relationships, reinforce hierarchical systems, and dismiss the collective actions of workers who seek to improve their working conditions. The normalization of authoritarian relationships in this episode starts with the characters themselves. The Wicked King and Queen Amina are considered royalty by the other stuffed animals, who often are depicted as deferring to their authority. Neither Doc nor any of the stuffed animals question this authoritarian relationship until the Wicked King sows dissent among the workers, who then began to also resent the Queen’s attitude. This expression of worker solidarity was

short lived because when the King and the workers refuse to submit to the Queen's authority in building the castle, she retreats to the ultimate authority figure, Doc McStuffins, for support in dealing with the rebellious workers. Doc gives unqualified support for the Queen's authoritarian leadership, effectively breaking the strike. At no point during the Queen's absence are the workers depicted as capable of directing their own labor. Without supervision, the workers seem incapable of devising a plan to rebuild the castle and even seem unable to work together in any capacity at all. The implicit message being that only through hierarchy can workers achieve any measure of productivity. In order to drive home this message Doc, the Queen, and all of the workers join together at the end of the episode and sing a song that praises authoritarianism and the "gals that get things done," which seems like a strange lyric because the Queen did not do any of the actual work on the castle. "There's nothing wrong with being number one!" the song exclaims. But maybe there *is* something wrong with being number one. Would a more democratic workplace with a flattened hierarchy be a better model?

Stories that Television Tells Us

From its beginning in the 1920's, television has been a unique source of messages for viewers. Although other forms of media predate television, the combined visual and auditory experience makes this media particularly compelling. Sometimes these messages are obvious, brought to life in 75 inches of technicolor 4K resolution. *Buy this! Time to upgrade! NEW and IMPROVED! Maybe she's born with it!* But sometimes the messages are not so obvious. Home Depot's new ad campaign, "How doers get things done!" portrays images of hard-working individuals landscaping manicured lawns and renovating dated rooms of their home. But what are the assumptions? What is a "doer"? It seems to be a positive label. Who would not want to be a doer? What is the alternative? Being lazy? If I do not update my home fixtures, I must not be a

doer. If I would rather spend time reading than landscaping my yard, I must not be a doer. Just the tagline of the ad campaign presents an ideology and a form of social conditioning.

Although shaping public opinion predates the technology of television, mass media has made the undertaking exponentially more effective. The relationship between mass media and societal manipulation has been demonstrated in many of the current divisions that we see in today's society. Differences in worldview, politics, economics, religion, and even personal values have been impacted to a greater or lesser extent by mass media (Taibbi, 2019).

According to media researchers Barwind et al. (2016), the United States has always struggled to balance individualism with the collective nature vital to a functioning society. From the construction of our vast interstate highway system to a nationwide system of public schooling, the United States has demonstrated its ability to respond to the needs of the common good. But all too often, this responsiveness has been tested and found lacking. Throughout history, shifts toward the common good have been routed with policy changes and legislative maneuvers, which have shifted the country away from any tendency toward the common good, toward a more individualistic reality. These efforts include expanding the role of private enterprise in public schools, reducing labor union membership, and expanding the influence of money in politics. While not directly placing the blame on mass media for these shifts in our nation's politics, Barwind and colleagues describe the influence of mass media in the atomization of society and the role that television plays in segregating groups of individual viewers into their own tribes that share common interests or worldviews. As a result, the world shaped by mass media, and television in particular, has been one that is more individualistic and increasingly less equipped to promote the common good (Barwind et al., 2016).

Public schools have not escaped the ramifications of this tendency toward a more individualistic society. The steady growth of charter schools and voucher programs over the last decade and the accompanying acceptance by the public of such growth is a testament to the influence of mass media. Information campaigns waged by those who would profit from privatization of public schools have been delivered through mass media, with documentaries like *Waiting for Superman* touting the need for alternatives to public schools. Even though students who attend charter schools do not generally have better academic performance than those who attend public schools and charter schools are more selective about the students who can attend, the public has a relatively positive view of this privatization scheme (Network for Public Education, n.d.).

Not only has mass media demonstrated its capacity to influence society as a whole but also has shown its ability to manipulate the behaviors and worldviews of individuals through social conditioning of the collective consciousness. The collective consciousness of a society represents the collection of understandings shared by the average members of that society (Allan, 2005). These shared beliefs give cohesion to society (Jary & Jary, 2005), influence our personal worldviews, and facilitate our behavior (Greenwood, 2003).

While this dissertation considers the overt and implicit messages in children's cartoons and does not focus on the impact of advertising or similar propaganda, it is important to discuss this powerful example of media that continues to shape the collective consciousness of viewers of all ages. Long before the television set became a common household appliance, or even its invention in 1927, advertising in newspapers and magazines reached many in the United States with messages promoting products and services. But a theory of how to effectively combine

messaging with human psychology in order to shape dispositions and tendencies of the public was beginning to take shape in the minds of some advertisers.

Recognizing the power of mass media to impact the collective consciousness of our society early in the 20th Century, advertising mogul Edward Bernays successfully employed numerous campaigns of social conditioning that were successful in manipulating public opinion about a wide variety of corporate products and topics (Tye, 2002). Most famously, he was responsible for a dramatic increase in the number of women smokers in the 1920's. During this time, many were protesting in favor of universal suffrage and women's rights. By rebranding cigarettes as "torches of freedom" and connecting them to the popular movements ongoing at the time, he successfully manipulated public opinion about smoking through mass media (O'Keefe & Pollay, 1996). Cigarette maker Phillip Morris continued the theme of Bernays's original campaign into the 1990's with the Virginia Slims tagline "You've come a long way, baby!" with frequent references to feminism and women's rights movements in advertisements. With the spectacular success of Bernays's corporate media campaigns and the emergence of television in the same decade, numerous corporate and governmental entities began to employ Bernays's techniques of social conditioning through the new media with the purpose of manipulating the public for their own purposes.

Since the inception of mass media, propaganda has been used to manipulate the public. Even before television, newspapers and magazines were the preferred media of shaping public opinion. Through his understanding of human psychology and market forces, coupled with a devout neoliberal worldview, Bernays set the stage for mass indoctrination of the public. He demonstrated that the public could be manipulated to believe almost anything. Even counter-cultural ideas would be adopted using proper psychological techniques delivered through

propaganda. This quote from Bernays' Propaganda illustrates his understanding of the power of the application of mass psychology through media:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind. (Bernays, 2004/1928, p. 9-10)

The idea that our beliefs and worldviews are being manipulated should create an imperative to further investigate propaganda in children's cartoons.

During the 1940's, animated programs began to appear in the homes of more Americans, as television sets quickly became ubiquitous. And these cartoons were not immune to the introduction of propaganda. Animated programs targeted to children saw a rapid growth in the mid-20th Century and were often filled with content intended to promote racist stereotypes and prejudice, particularly towards cultures considered enemies of the US (van Wormer & Juby, 2016). For example, both Warner Brothers and Disney studios produced wartime content intended to generate patriotism for America and revulsion of America's enemies. The usage of

race and gender-based stereotypes in children's cartoons to promote narratives continued into the 21st Century and has only recently begun to be challenged.

Children's cartoons have been used to disseminate propaganda to shape the worldviews of viewers for almost a century. From promoting war to selling toys, this form of media is rife with messages and content that is only apparent when taking a critical perspective.

Understanding the overt and implicit messages passed on to children through children's cartoons is the first step in equipping parents and teachers with the tools they need to understand the values and beliefs that children are exposed to and based on this understanding, take action about what programs children are allowed to watch.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine cartoons created for preschool children to better understand the messages that those cartoons send. Parents and educators can utilize the framework described in this study as a model of a critical literacy approach to media, which can be modified to include categories suitable for the analysis that they are undertaking. In doing so, parents and educators can better understand the media messages that they are sharing with their children and students, and as their children and students get older, help them understand how to watch media critically.

Cartoons are a part of the systems of learning that teach children about the world and their place in it. These systems cannot be critiqued without asking the right questions, and forming the right questions is only possible when the system is understood. But why is such an exploration important? First, as critical theorist Freire (1970) understood, our beliefs either support our enslavement or our freedom, so it is vital that we teach children to recognize indoctrination by exposing them to opposing narratives. The ruling class should not determine

the beliefs of children or adults, so their messages must be understood and critiqued. Secondly, I assert that it is important to teach children to challenge our system of capitalism for three reasons.

First, capitalism subverts democracy by concentrating wealth with a small number of extremely rich individuals. This wealth translates into influence with elected leaders who are responsible for making public policy. According to Piketty (2017), this influence directly translates into policies that benefit the rich, so much so that the preferences of middle and lower class individuals have little to no influence on the policies that they live under.

Second, an inherent part of any capitalist economy is the expropriation of excess profit from the workers to the owners. Traditionally called “wage slavery”, this system represents a system of exploitation whereby the laborer does not receive the full value of his/her labor. The profits extracted by the capitalist class from the labor of others is a form of theft because laborers do not receive the full value of their labor and have no say in how the extracted profits are used.

Third, although the term “meritocracy” is now commonly seen as a positive mechanism of a capitalist economy, it was originally used as an anti-capitalist slur by socialists who understood it as a “ludicrously unequal state that surely no one would want to live in.” (Littler, 2017, para. 7). Giving the already gifted even more gifts seemed to be a recipe for inequality to those who used the term to critique capitalism. But the 1950’s were a time of demonization for socialists, so the argument was ignored, and meritocracy perversely assumed its place as the ultimate goal for a just society.

While a common narrative about our capitalist system is one of meritocratic success, where individual success is a function of the effort and determination that they apply, the reality is that the majority of individuals in the United States will remain in the economic class into

which they were born or move to a lower economic class (Athreya et al., 2016). Despite this fact, Western capitalist governments spread the idea that a meritocratic system is both laudable and present in our societies. There is little light between Barack Obama and Donald Trump on this issue. “We are true to our creed when a little girl born into bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else,” proclaimed Obama in his 2013 inaugural address (Obama, 2013, p. 2) “We’re a nation committed to equal and abundant opportunity for citizens of every race, color, religion, and creed. The American dream is the sacred birthright of every American child. And that’s what we have, is we have the American dream.,” exclaimed Trump in his 2020 Spirit of America speech (Trump, 2020). While Obama’s rhetoric was more sentimental than Trump’s, the message is the same. We have a system of fairness in place, they tell us, or at least we are working toward that goal, where every person and company can have an equal chance at being successful through their own grit and determination. Capitalism needs this myth in order to be accepted as a legitimate system. And the rich need this myth to justify their wealth. The reality is that capitalism is a privilege-based system. The privileged succeed, while the non-privileged fail. Class privilege is by far the most powerful. Money is power to influence policy. From drug companies who reap untold profits from publicly funded vaccine research to trans-national automobile manufacturers receiving billions in government subsidies. From a wealthy individual, who knows all the right people to land a lucrative job for his son or daughter to the tall/handsome/intelligent/charismatic/Christian/straight/cis/white individual who is hired for the well paid administrative position, there is little we can point to that does not represent some form of privilege in every success story.

Together, these three characteristics of our economic system contribute to the injustices of authoritarianism (by limiting democracy) and poverty (through wage slavery and a privilege-

based caste system). When these characteristics are normalized in children's systems of learning, they become difficult to question or challenge. Therefore, I believe it is important to examine how the messages in children's cartoons may or may not contribute to the normalization of belief systems that have an important impact on how individuals live their lives.

Why Children's Cartoons?

Cartoons, as opposed to live action programs, were chosen for this research for several reasons, including my familiarity with the content of many cartoons, the history of cartoons being used to express narratives with the purpose of influencing society, and the quantity of cartoons that are available in comparison to that of live action programs for children of the ages studied in this research.

The importance of understanding the messages in cartoons for preschool aged children is related to both the inability of young children to critically analyze a text as well as how easily influenced young children are. Children at this age group are learning about how the world works and are willing to accept most any explanation given to them. Their relative lack of life experience makes even fantastic ideas possible. Parents and teachers should understand these messages in order to make decisions about allowing children to view these programs or not.

Whether or not we agree with the messages being expressed in children's cartoons only matters after we understand what those messages are. To a Marxist, expressions of capitalist ideologies in children's cartoons would serve the role of facilitating the social reproduction of belief systems so that the next generation of working class individuals willingly accept conceptualizations of hierarchy, consumption, ethics, entrepreneurship, and responsibility that are most suited to the capitalist class. Because children's values may be influenced by the media they consume, it is important to understand the messages communicated by that media.

With the above rationale motivating this research, the purpose of this content analysis study is to identify and describe the ideologies presented to viewers in a selection of popular children's cartoons. Ideologies presented will be generally defined as the narratives and messages expressed by the characters and images in the cartoons. These messages may serve to support reactionary character traits and worldviews that are valued by a capitalist society. In promoting a particular set of values, the ideology expressed in many children's cartoons may represent a form of social conditioning that takes place early in the life of an individual and serves to shape their worldviews in ways that impact their relationships with work, their relationships with other individuals, and their relationships with things. Research questions informed by this purpose include:

- 1) How do cartoons targeted to preschool children portray social and economic systems?
- 2) What explicit and implicit messages do these cartoons convey about relationships with authority figures, consumerism, entrepreneurship, right and wrong behaviors, and responsibility to others?

Marxist and Pluralist Media Theories

When approaching any text from a critical perspective, certain assumptions about how the world works must be in place for any analysis to be meaningful. One of those assumptions concerns intentionality. In particular, whether or not the curriculum of the text is intentional or incidental. From a Marxist perspective it is assumed that there is intentional expression of capitalist ideologies through overt and implicit messages. In Marxist Media Theory, the ruling class uses mass media to indoctrinate societies with the values and belief systems that are of benefit to the ruling class (Thompson, 2019). Although the ruling class are not the authors of the texts themselves, they either place individuals who share their values into positions where those

values can be transmitted through texts, or they use their influence to promote existing texts that already share their values (Chandler & Munday, 2011; Curran, 2002; Thompson, 2019). Some of those values are the focus of this research and are described below in the framework section.

While the framework of this research is based on Marxist Media Theory, the competing Pluralist Theory is often offered as a rebuttal to the idea that the ruling class uses media to indoctrinate society with their values. Pluralism posits that the capitalist free market determines which messages are transmitted through media. Viewers are free to choose which values and worldviews they would like to be exposed to and choose those that are a reflection of their own belief system. In this context, the most successful media programming would reflect the values of consumers (Thompson, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

This research will use a Marxist lens to explore the ideologies expressed through narratives in children's cartoons. This perspective serves to bound the scope of the study and will focus on the curriculum in children's cartoons that may shape belief systems beneficial to a capitalist economy. Because our capitalist system envelops the world we live in, we understand the world in ways that have been shaped by that system. Marxism provides a way to see the world outside capitalist narratives, enabling the possibility of a critical analysis of those narratives. I will use this approach to question long held beliefs and assumptions we hold about each other, material possessions, our environment, and ourselves. This freedom enables us to critique the narratives and ideologies expressed in children's cartoons in a way only possible with a Marxist lens. But first, it is important to understand how our belief systems are shaped, how we learn, and the role that media plays.

Traditional views of television have either presented the technology as a “window to the world” or as a “reflection” of society. But this research rejects those views as misrepresentations of the relationship between television and viewers, and positions television as a powerful mechanism for shaping society through the collective experience of mass media (Macey et al., 2014). Evidence of this mechanism is discussed in Chapter 2, in the section on Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998). With this framing, television loses the characteristics of a window and presents to us a world that is familiar but distorted. By presenting narratives that emphasize or marginalize, enlarge or erase elements of our world and present them back to us, television has been described as a *funhouse mirror* (Mittell, 2009). This effect of television, described by Mittell, and utilized by Bernays is important to investigate to better understand the messages that shape the worldviews of children. The capitalist ideologies expressed through these narratives are particularly important to understand so that they can be questioned and challenged. The following are a list of those narratives and a description of their relationship with Marxism.

Relationship to Authority Figures

These kinds of narratives are almost universally accepted by capitalists and the working class and often manifest as some form of hierarchy in the workplace. As noted by Chomsky and Waterstone (2021) the capitalist workplace is an undemocratic environment where individuals are given authority over the work lives of their subordinates. From a Marxist perspective, capitalist workplaces depend on this kind of hierarchy to enforce discipline on workers. Fear of being deprived of livelihood by those with authority is a powerful motivator to submit to their dictates.

Consumerism

Marxist thought about the culture of consumerism being integral to driving the engine of a capitalist economy centers around the concept of the fetishism of commodity, which is demonstrated by the disconnection of everything that goes into the creation of a good or service from the good or service itself (Tromsness, 2021). This serves to transform the product into nothing more than object of desire freed from relationships of labor and production. Unless those relationships are themselves commodified as part of the product, as with “fair trade” goods or “made in America” slogans, marketing always depicts products completely untethered from any connections to their production, and children are often the target of such messages. Children are not only targeted with toy commercials outside of regular programming but may also internalize materialistic messages presented in cartoons. These messages may take the form of characters demonstrating desire for things that they do not currently have.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is often considered a laudable trait or skill in capitalist societies and has the goal of commodification of goods and services. To a Marxist, being an effective entrepreneur usually translates into being good at contributing to commodity fetishism while making yourself as rich as possible. According to Hayes (2021) at Investopedia.com an entrepreneur is: “...an individual who creates a new business, bearing most of the risks and enjoying most of the rewards. The entrepreneur is commonly seen as an innovator, a source of new ideas, goods, services, and business/or procedures.” (para. 1)

Entrepreneurs play a key role in any economy, using the skills and initiative necessary to anticipate needs and bringing good new ideas to market. Entrepreneurship that proves to be

successful in taking on the risks of creating a startup is rewarded with profits, fame, and continued growth opportunities.

This definition identifies the rationale for becoming an entrepreneur and the role that they play in capitalist societies, while appealing to materialistic reasons for such a pursuit.

Lessons about Right and Wrong

In children's cartoons, lessons about right and wrong often involve rule violations. These violations often involve an individual character's personal property, and often arises in the context of some form of crime, such as theft or vandalism. Property rights represent a vital element of capitalist economies that allows for the accumulation of wealth and property by claim or free trade. In its simplest form, these rights are expressed through laws that grant ownership of resources and include the right of use and modification, the right to generate income, and the right to end ownership through sale, donation, or destruction (Klein & Robinson, 2011). In capitalist economic systems, these laws enable "the creation of wealth by facilitating efficient resource use and development, trade, capital accumulation, and the peaceful resolution of conflict." (Rubin & Klumpp, 2012, p. 204)

To Marx, property rights refer to a relatively narrow class of property that could be used to generate profits by employees (Hiley, 2018). This kind of property included factories, banks, transportation services, farmland, etc. When he asserted the need to abolish private property, these were the types of properties he was referring to (Hiley, 2018). Capitalists wish to protect the right to privately own such property in order to extract profits from the employees that work on those properties, and rule violations that offend these ownership rights must be shown in a negative light.

Other rule violations may not cross into criminality, but often involve cheating and deceit. Teaching children that rule violations such as these do not go unrecognized or unpunished is important to a capitalist society where workplaces depend on such rules. Employees are expected by their employers to follow the rules of the workplace, which often include punctuality, showing diligence in work, not stealing company time for personal use, respecting workplace property, and following directions given by supervisors quickly and efficiently.

Responsibility to Others

In a capitalist economic system, responsibility to others is often limited because it is seen as infringing on the rights of the individual, as seen in many political responses to socialist initiatives (Anderson, 2019). To Marxists, the promotion of individualism as a universal value is misleading because the ruling class only intends it to be for themselves (Lenin, 1917). In this sense, the only kind of real individualism existing in our capitalist society is bourgeois individualism. The level of individualism that any individual can enjoy is determined by their relationship to the means of production, meaning that the owners of capital can freely be individuals while their workers serve at the pleasure of the capitalists and live chained to their roles in workplace dictatorships (Anderson, 2019). As noted by Lenin (1917), “Freedom in capitalist society always remains about the same as it was in ancient Greek republics: Freedom for slave owners.” (p. 60)

As described above, individualism is heralded as a virtue in capitalist societies, but the narrative can be seen as a defense mechanism against a collective response to economic injustice. Individualism encourages a self-centered worldview that is often used to vilify unions and social support systems, like Medicaid, SNAP, Pell Grants, and TANF. Any program that

might decrease desperation for a job or reduce the fear of being fired is the target of this narrative.

This conceptual framework will be used to explore ideology in five popular children's cartoons. Chapter 2 expands on this framework and connects this study to studies of critical literacy and children's media with a review of the literature. Chapter 3 presents the methodology for the study, while Chapters 4 and 5 present findings and discuss their implications.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the basic assumptions of this research is that humans are influenced in action and belief by other humans. With a focus on Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, this chapter first explores the social aspect of learned behavior and how we learn from one another. Application of this theory to media is then considered with a discussion of the connections that viewers may form with television characters and how those connections can lead to behavioral changes when viewers become invested in the media that they consume. As discussed below, those changes in behavior often relate to mimicking of those media personalities in action, dress, and deed. Based on this foundation of social learning mechanisms and media influence, cultivation theory is explored as a context for understanding how media can directly shape the worldviews of viewers. Proposed by Gerbner (1998), this model asserts that media can influence how we see the world, both positively and negatively. While Gerbner's research focused on an exploration of television violence and how viewers consuming large amounts of violent programming tend to view the world as a more dangerous place than it is, propagandist Edward Bernays was well aware of this influence in the early 20th Century and used this understanding to promote the sales of numerous products through mass media advertising campaigns. The chapter concludes with a connection to the Common Core English Language Arts standards, which underscore the importance of taking a critical approach to media, as well as a review of previous literature that critically examines ideology and propaganda in various children's media. Focusing

on a Marxist understanding of relationships with authority figures, consumerism, entrepreneurship, right and wrong behaviors, and responsibility to others, this research hopes to gain a better understanding of the messages in children's cartoons and how those messages may relate to our economic system by asking the following questions:

1. How do cartoons targeted to preschool children portray social and economic systems?
2. What explicit and implicit messages do these cartoons convey about relationships with authority figures, consumerism, entrepreneurship, right and wrong behaviors, and responsibility to others?

Social Learning Theory

In comparing the work of early learning theorists, McLeod (2016), notes an evolution in the models of these researchers. In Skinner's (1935) work, human behavior could be studied within a stimulus-response framework where the actions that we take are influenced by the result of previous actions that we have taken in similar situations. For example, the negative comments that we might receive from others when we talk loudly in the library would be likely to influence us to use a quieter voice in the future. And conversely, receiving an extra slice of cake after dinner for helping wash the dishes would likely influence us to help wash the dishes more often. So, behaviors that are consistently punished are less likely to persist, and for behaviors that are consistently rewarded, the opposite is true. But to Bandura (1977), this frame was informative, yet limited in scope, and placed too little emphasis on the internal processes that are ongoing in each individual. Specifically, Bandura's model places emphasis on the "information processing" occurring when individuals consider the connections between their actions and the end results of those actions (McLeod, 2016).

According to Social Learning Theory, learned behaviors take place in a social context that may or may not include positive or negative reinforcement mechanisms. To Bandura, even without mechanisms of reinforcement, behaviors can be learned and expressed through observation. Evidence of this was observed during the Bobo experiment (Bandura et al., 1961), where children 3 to 5 years old demonstrated aggressive behaviors toward a particular doll called a Bobo doll after observing models behaving in an aggressive manner toward the same doll. In the experiment, one group of children was asked to watch a non-aggressive model interacting with a Bobo doll, while another group of children watched an aggressive model interacting with a Bobo doll. The children who observed the aggressive behavior were much more likely to be aggressive when they had the opportunity to come into contact with a Bobo doll, even in the absence of any reinforcement framework. Bandura et al. (1961) interpreted this experiment to be a confirmation of the need to move beyond Skinner's stimulus-response framework in order to accommodate the impact of social context and the inner experience of individuals.

For Bandura, behaviors can be learned whether the observation is of actual people in the same room with you or if the observation is of representations of people displayed on a screen (Bandura, 2009). Regardless of observation method, Bandura asserted the need for four elements to be in place for observational learning to occur. The first of these is the requirement to have the attention of the individual. No learning can take place if the individual is not paying attention. And the level and quality of attention can vary depending on inner factors unique to the individual, which can include how relatable the model is, how likable they might be, or the connection the observer might have to the model. Second, in order to have learned behavior, the observer must remember the behavior of the model. To do so, the observer must be able to understand what the model is doing and then be able to internalize the behavior in a way that is

meaningful. Third, the observing individual must be capable of reproducing the behavior. Some observed behaviors might not be reproduceable because of the lack of ability or skill of the observer. Watching someone work calculus problems is not helpful to someone without a foundation in Algebra because they lack the skills necessary to reproduce that behavior. Finally, motivation is an important element to behavioral learning. While reinforcement is not always necessary to produce learned behavior, it is often the case that rewards and punishments will increase or decrease the probability of the behavior being demonstrated.

Bandura (2009) asserted that, “attentional processes determine what is selectively observed in the profusion of modeling influences and what information is extracted from ongoing modeled events.” (p.99). Applying this first element to children’s cartoon media, it is easy to see how children’s attention can be drawn to lively animated characters, often drawn in representations of animals that they find appealing. Coupled with a story that children find engaging, the bright colors and motion of the animation demands the attention of anyone in the room. Whether it is race cars and monster trucks, often targeted to younger male viewers, or ponies and princesses targeted to younger female viewers, there are always a multitude of elements that that work together to catch and keep children’s attention focused on the screen and on the action of the show.

The actions of characters in children’s cartoons are meant to be easily interpretable to children of the age group intended for viewership. When coupled with multiple exposures to similar behavior in multiple episodes of the program or to similar behavior in episodes of other programs, retention of the behavior is strengthened, which is a necessary second element in Bandura’s model. With the first two elements in place, attention and retention, the final two readily fall into place. Children have the ability to reproduce the behaviors under consideration

of this research because they are either beliefs or are corresponding actions that follow from those beliefs. For example, children's worldviews may be shaped by media to believe that honesty is the best policy, and then may demonstrate that in their lives by being honest people. Additionally, they might be influenced to have a certain disposition toward people who violate property rights because of behaviors that they have seen on the screen. Although they might not be in a situation where they can put those behaviors into practice, their values and beliefs are still shaped by repeated observation of the behaviors of those on the screen. Finally, Bandura model includes an element of motivation through punishments or rewards that serve to influence reproduction of the behavior. Children often observe such rewards and punishments play out on screen in response to behaviors that media producers decide should be punished or rewarded. For example, when "villains" in children's cartoons violate property rights by stealing, they may be rewarded initially by the fruits of their crime, their deeds will ultimately be punished by the program's narrative in a way that makes it clear that individuals committing such offenses will not be rewarded (and will often be punished).

Because of Social Learning Theory's emphasis on the internal processes that translate observed behaviors into reproduced behaviors, the model is uniquely situated to provide a framework for understanding how children's values and beliefs are shaped by media. By moving beyond Skinner's purely stimulus/response model and including the capacity of individuals to rationalize during the process, Bandura's model successfully captures complex behaviors that had previously been inadequately explained by previous models.

Social Learning through Media

““Will you turn the parlor off?” he asked. “That’s my family.” responded Mildred.

"Books aren't people. You read and I look all around, but there isn't anybody! ... Now, ...

My 'family' is people. They tell me things: I laugh, they laugh! And the colors!" she said.
(Bradbury, 1953, p. 69)

For the *Fahrenheit 451* character quoted above, Mildred Montag, the characters and personalities that she watched every day in her television parlor were her family. The social bonds and connections that she formed with electronic images were more real and important to her than any she had with a real person, even her husband Guy. Although today's media is not quite as immersive as that in the dystopian future of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the response that many of us have to beloved characters on our favorite programs can be quite similar to Mildred's. We may understand that the fictional characters we see on the screen are not real people, but the social connections and learnings that we take away from these have an impact on us that lasts beyond the program being viewed.

According to Russell et al. (2004), our social connection to characters in media starts similarly to loyalty that we might have for our favorite brand of dish soap. This connection they refer to as a *viewer to program vertical connection*. As we would appreciate the presentation, quality, and value of a particular brand of soap, so too would we be attracted to similar qualities of a favorite media program. The writing style, special effects, or acting ability of the characters make us loyal to a program, particularly after we have made an investment in watching the program for a length of time. Further demonstrating this loyalty, we may even purchase merchandise like clothing, toys, games, or books related to the show (Russell et al., 2004).

Sharing the experience that we are having with our favorite programs with real life friends who also watch the show represents the second level of connection. What they referred to as a *viewer to viewer horizontal connection* by Russell et al. (2004), takes place when we talk about the show with others in a way that we might discuss real people. This can be particularly

true when some common experience of a group of people might be similar to that of characters in media. For example, health care workers discussing the latest happenings on ER, or comic book fans coming together to talk about the newest Spider-Man movie.

The ultimate strength of social connection between viewers and characters in media was described by Russell et al. (2004) as a *viewer to character vertical connection*. This connection represents a blurring of reality for viewers in that the media characters begin to take on a reality of their own. No longer are they just images on an electronic device or projections on a screen. We want these characters to be a part of our lives. Although, in a rational sense, we certainly understand that they are fictional, we behave as if they were real people. We want to live near these people, be friends with them, be a part of their lives. We might even adopt mannerisms or dress similarly to media characters in the effort strengthen the connection (Russell et al., 2004). The social connections we can have to media characters is just as strong as we can have to each other. They can influence us in the same way as the real people in our lives. Bandura (2009) demonstrated how our beliefs and behaviors are shaped by the people in our lives. This is no less the case for media. The stronger our connection to media, the more susceptible we are to its influence. And this influence cultivates how we see the world. The funhouse mirror described by Mittell (2009) may often be mistaken as a window. When this happens, we think we are looking at an accurate description of our world when we are not, leading to a false impression of reality. As described in the next section, Gerbner's (1998/1968) media research illustrated the impact on belief systems that can happen when media is seen as a window to the world.

Cultivation Theory

Concerns about the power of media to influence society's thoughts and opinions date back decades to the ubiquitous spread of television. Violence was of particular concern at this time, and television was seen as a potential instigator of violent or harmful acts. To better understand this influence, the Cultural Indicators Project, commissioned by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1968, studied the impact that television was having on American society. Lead investigator of the project, Gerbner, developed a Cultivation Theory model at a time when it was seen that television was quickly becoming a major source of entertainment and leisure activity in the American household. Gerbner (1998/1968) asserted that the purpose of the Cultural Indicators Project and the subsequent development of cultivation theory lay in the need to address a particularly new phenomenon whereby millions of individuals can now passively absorb a relatively small number of stories presented to them. He sought to understand the potential impact such widespread storytelling might have on a society and the results were clear, particularly when it came to television violence. As detailed later in this chapter, Gerber's research showed a positive relationship between the number of violent acts viewed on television and how dangerous the viewer believed the real world to be. As a viewer consumed more violent content, their level of fear about the world increased.

Underscoring the need for such research, educational theorist Bruner (1987) asserted that learning through storytelling is a powerful mechanism for retention. His theory of learning divides understanding of the world into two classifications. This model presents a paradigmatic form of thinking and a narrative form of thinking. The former corresponds to categorical approach to the world where we understand the world by mentally categorizing concepts, while

the latter corresponds to our construction of reality from our culture-based narratives (Murray, 2003). His research demonstrated a 22-fold increase in recalling information when the information is part of a narrative (Bruner, 1987). Because people generally learn from each other through stories, the idea that this new medium capable of presenting stories at such a mass scale was of particular concern. Not only was the scale of distribution problematic to Gerbner and his colleagues, but the idea that stories from small groups of people, some with agendas, would be widely distributed to anyone with a television set and could supplant the kinds of homegrown, personal stories that individuals told each other for generations (Gerbner, 1998).

According to Gerbner (2009), television shaped viewers' worldviews in a way that supersedes identity or group association and is almost solely dependent on amount of consumption. Labelling this phenomenon *mainstreaming*, Gerbner (2009) asserted that heavy viewers of media (greater than 4 hours each day) from different groups will likely have more similar beliefs and worldviews than one would otherwise expect due to the common values and beliefs acquired from media. For example, heavy viewers of media that depicts unrealistic images of male and female body types would be more likely to assume that the "ideal" type is closer to the images that they are seeing on television than might be expected, regardless of the culture the individuals are a part of. In describing how television can have this impact on individual worldview, Gerbner (1998/1968) developed the cultivation theory model to better understand this process.

Cultivation theory is supported by a multifaceted framework that includes the human ability to work in a symbolic environment, the types of cultural stories prevalent in our society, the symbolic function of television, and important traits of television that enable it to have an impact on society.

Symbolic Environment

Humans are able to understand the world symbolically. Unlike other animals, we do not only have to rely on the things that happen to us to understand the world, but we are able to listen to what others have to say in order to shape our understanding of the world. Hearing a story about a friend's experience with their pet spider would be more than enough for many of us to understand the experience than having to get our own (Mosharafa, 2015).

Story Telling

To Gerbner (as cited by the Media Education Foundation, 2007) there are three different kinds of stories that relate culture summarized these kinds of stories. The first are stories about *how things work*, which are often illustrative narratives about everyday life, and may take the form of “dramas, fairy tales, television programs, movies, or novels. These stories take us behind the scenes to reveal these dynamics, showing us how the systems that govern how the world works. They build a fantasy we call reality” (p. 4). The second kind of story represents those that tell *how things are* and are usually meant to be true stories about the world. These stories are meant to “confirm or elaborate upon reality. These are stories about the way things are: legends about the past, news, or scientific information. Such stories tend to confirm, rather than undermine the rules and goals of and given society” (p. 4). The third type of story that relates culture is demonstrated in *what to do* narratives. These stories are about “value and choice” (p. 4). They present to the listener the conclusion of the three story types. If the listener has heard about *how things work* and they understand *how things are*, then “these are the choices, and this is what I think you ought do about them. Such stories include sermons, instructions, and commercials” (p. 4) with commercials making up a large portion of the *what to do* or *what to buy*

narratives that we hear today. To Gerbner these methods of storytelling represented the transmission of culture and were the primary ways television served as an expression of it.

The Symbolic Function of Television

Echoing Mittell's (2009) "funhouse mirror" analogy, cultivation theory asserts that the world created by television storytelling is not a representation of reality, but a representation of a fictional world presented as the real world to viewers. Furthermore, this fictional world is the creation of small groups of individuals who produce media (Mosharafa, 2015). The images and stories told on these screens contain expressions of ideologies that viewers internalize and incorporate into their own worldviews in a way that influences how they see the world, other people, things, and relationships between all of those. This transmission of values and beliefs happens across the spectrum of media genres, with fictional media programs carrying as much potential to influence worldviews as news or documentary programming, although in a different capacity, with fictional stories more likely a source of "normalization" of behaviors, where individuals come to understand how to interact with others and the world (Chandler, 1997). In the absence of direct experience, over time, individuals begin to live in the artificial worlds presented to them in media (Mosharafa, 2015).

Television Traits

Cultivation theory describes several elements necessary for media to have a meaningful impact on a society's beliefs about the world. These elements include the ubiquitous nature of television, where media can be accessed by those of nearly any income bracket; its ease of access, where the effort required to engage with the media are low, requiring no special skills or literacy; and the consistency of messaging throughout programming. This consistency can be

observed when repeated themes arise in storytelling narratives of programs that may or may not be of the same genre. While these “meta-stories” and presentation of programs may widely vary, there is a consistency of learnings that viewers will take away (Mosharafa, 2015).

While television media serves the role of influencing beliefs and values, it can also serve as an indicator of those beliefs and values. In this sense, television media can also be a multi-directional process. Prior to social change, television programming can be seen as a reflection of the beliefs and practices of society and during social change it can be an indicator of that change. For example, Shanahan (2004) showed that societal representations in television media of African Americans, women, and LGBTQ individuals over time correspond to changing social norms and values going on in society.

Television Violence and Worldview

It is important to note that the multi-directional process does not seem applicable to all societal narratives. Some narratives are more likely to be cultural indicators, while others might not be. For example, while violence in society has been on a steady decline since the 1970’s, television programming has not reflected this decline, and violence in the media has held relatively constant (Shanahan, 2004).

Why might violence be so significantly different from representations of minority groups in media? Why would one be a cultural indicator and the other not? This speaks to the motivations of content producers. Violence is universally understood regardless of culture. It is easily decoded regardless of culture. From a profit perspective, this makes it a very safe option (Signorielli, 2003), and demonstrates the power of media to go beyond being an indicator of society and to actively shape worldview and belief.

The *mean world syndrome*, described by Gerbner (1998), is the result of heavy viewing of violence in television media and is characterized by an unwarranted belief that the world is a more dangerous place than it actually is. While they did not report an increased likelihood of being violent themselves, individuals who watched more than 4 hours of violent programming each day were much more likely to suffer from anxiety and negativity about the world and often reported feeling that they are unsafe when venturing out into the world (Gerbner, 2009).

Other than the length of time spent watching media, “resonance” also plays a significant role in the influence of media on values and beliefs. Resonance considers the interactions of environment along with the stories on the screen. While everyone would be influenced by heavy media usage, the effect on some users might be even greater due to their environment. For example, while fear of being harmed is increased in heavy users of violent media, the effect is even more pronounced on those who might live in an environment already perceived as dangerous (Gerbner, 1998/1968).

In a sense, resonance can be seen as a moderator for media influence on viewers. The environmental resonance of a viewer can suppress or amplify the impact that media has on a viewer and works similarly to confirmation bias, where existing beliefs are reinforced and opposing beliefs are resisted. Children raised in upper class households likely have a belief system strongly influenced by the meritocratic beliefs of their parents and meritocratic narratives in children’s cartoons would likely reinforce those existing beliefs about society (Gerbner, 1998/1968).

While Gerbner’s (1998/1968) research on television violence in the Cultural Indicators Project demonstrated a connection between media and beliefs of viewers about violence in the

world, later researchers have explored how media can shape other beliefs about society and have provided further support for cultivation theory.

Support for Cultivation Theory

Gerbner's (1998/1968) research on television and its effect on society clearly identifies and explains the impact that messages in media have in shaping public opinion and worldviews. Other research also reports findings that support this model of media influence. According to many researchers (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Do Rozario, 2004; England et al., 2011; Herbozo et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2002; Kimball, 1986; Quillen, 2018; Rosenwasser et al., 1989; Scharrer & Warren, 2022; Sengonul, 2017), cultivation theory is strongly supported in describing the influence of media on a wide variety of beliefs, including social roles, violence, body image, and adolescent alcohol use. The impact of media on many of these beliefs has remained consistent over the past 40 years, with studies from the late 1980s to the late 2000s demonstrating a relationship between children's consumption of media and preferences in gender roles (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Herbozo et al., 2004; Kimball, 1986; Rosenwasser et al., 1989) as well as relationships between representations of body image in media and how children perceive their own bodies (Do Rozario, 2004; England et al., 2011). Later research focusing on qualities often associated with toxic masculinity, such as emotional detachment and dominance, were found to be related to the amount of similar type media programming consumed by male adolescents (Scharrer & Warren, 2022).

Although children's media has demonstrated a recent trend toward diversity, inclusion, and a less stereotypical treatment of gender, there is a long history of gender socialization in this type of media. Historically, female characters in children's cartoons have traditionally been less visible in cartoon media, with male characters taking up most of the screen time (Streicher,

1974). This continues to be the case well into the 21st Century, as demonstrated by Hare and Hoke's (2019) content analysis of female characters in the 150 top grossing animated children's films from 1980-2018, which indicated less than 30% female characters in speaking roles.

Female characters are also generally more passive than their male counterparts, usually outside the action awaiting male characters to complete their activities. Historically, male characters have been generally presented as having a much wider variety of occupations, while female characters are often limited to traditional roles (Carter, 1991; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995).

While progress has been made, research from almost three decades later demonstrates only 1 in 4 working age female characters depicted in children's and adolescent media are participating in the workforce (Smith et al., 2019).

The effect of this gender stereotyping in media has been shown to shape how children view themselves and others. When children spend time watching programs that present "non-traditional gender roles", they were more likely to demonstrate behaviors that indicate less gender stereotyped beliefs (Rosenwasser et al., 1989). More recent studies have demonstrated similar findings, with Scharrer and Blackburn (2018) reporting that frequent viewing of sports programming is predictive of support for traditional male gender roles in young adults.

Along with the influence of media in shaping children's beliefs about social roles, the correlation between violence in children's cartoons and aggressive behaviors by children has been well studied in the context of cultivation theory. Watching media that contains themes of physical aggression by adolescents is significantly associated with aggressive tendencies toward other individuals (Johnson et al., 2002; Quillen, 2018; Sengonul, 2017). Researchers noted that certain groups of adolescents were particularly vulnerable to the influence of violence in media,

including children with emotional problems, victims of parental abuse, children with learning disabilities, and minority and immigrant children (Johnson et al., 2002).

Not only does cultivation theory effectively describe the influence of media on perceptions of genders roles and dispositions towards violence, body image is another area where media shapes attitudes and beliefs. From 1959-1988 the apparent body weight of women considered iconically beautiful in television media declined steadily to the point that over half of the women would be clinically considered to suffer from anorexia (Wiseman et al., 1992). Thin, attractive individuals formed the vast majority of female lead characters across every genre of television media in the late 20th Century, and this physical appearance was usually associated with positive personality traits and economic success. (Harrison, 2000). This messaging about the ideal appearance of women in media had led to the widespread belief in our society that the media ideal is not only realistic, but also attainable for most women (Schooler et al., 2004).

Paraphrasing Shrum (2009) in reference to cultivation theory and body image, VanVonderen and Kinnally (2012) wrote:

Cultivation may not always create attitudes, but often serves to reinforce them. The more “thin ideal” images women observe, the more accessible these images become.

Additionally, the positive connotations that are associated with the thin-ideal may become more accessible. Contrastingly, the more negative associations with overweight people that are observed, the more retrievable they may be, augmenting the sense of importance of maintaining a thin body shape. These retrieved associations may serve to enforce social attitudes regarding weight and its social implications – i.e., thinness is good, while being overweight is bad. (p. 43)

The New Propaganda

Whether creating beliefs or reinforcing them, cultivation theory has been demonstrated to be a well-suited model for describing how media influences the values and belief systems of individuals. Because so many human behaviors and beliefs are learned socially, and media has been shown to have a similar power to influence, the ubiquitous nature of television makes it vital that we understand the messages in our media. Marxist philosopher Debord (2020) described the society that we live in as a *Society of the Spectacle* where while we assume that our beliefs are our own, though they have actually been dictated to us by others. Writing about consumer culture and the influence of media on our society, Debord asserted:

The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him (Debord, 2020, p.11).

If Debord is correct, then our worldviews may be shaped by the devices that we use for entertainment. Our leisure time spent in front of screens may not just be a way to disengage from the real world for pleasure but may also be a time of indoctrination. Debord's Marxist critique of society illustrated capitalism's total colonization of our values and beliefs, and he well understood the importance of propaganda to a capitalist economy. According to the father of modern propaganda, Edward Bernays, the stories that media tells us are not neutral, they influence us and shape our understanding of the world in very intentional ways.

Media and Public Opinion

Stories shape the way that we see the world: Stories that we tell each other, stories that our parents, our teachers, our pastors, our peers tell us. No one recognized the power of media to

tell these stories like Edward Bernays. Bernays told stories through mass media with the intention of shaping public opinion. Bernays believed that because democratically elected officials needed public support in order to accomplish goals, it was a necessity for the public to be manipulated to believe the things necessary to reach those goals. He believed that this “intelligent manipulation” of the public was necessary for a functioning democracy and saw those with the power to use media to manipulate in such a way as the true ruling class of society. To Bernays, democracy should be “managed”, with public opinion shaped and molded to reflect the desires of others. But why is such manipulation necessary? To Bernays, this was important in order to avoid the chaos caused by a lack of clarity and consensus. He argued that large, complex societies would fracture into a multitude of competing ideas if propaganda were not employed to direct and focus public opinion. To Bernays, propaganda was not to be looked at negatively, it was a vital element of any stable society (Tye, 2002).

In developing his theory, Bernays relied upon the work of psychologists, including Le Bon (1896), who describes a group psychology distinctly different than one might expect in any individual member of a group. Le Bon asserted that when a group mentality asserts itself, individuals often cast aside their personal values and beliefs, which come to be supplanted by the values and beliefs of the group. During this transformation, three distinct patterns emerge that support the process. These patterns include a feeling of anonymity through which individualism and rationality fade, leaving one with the feeling of being impervious to harm. In such a state, where rationality is set aside, individuals in the group become extremely vulnerable to suggestions made by the most vocal and charismatic of the group, leading to the final pattern of contagion, where those views and motivations spread to the entire group and the group transforms from a collection of individuals to a collective with singular purpose and resolve.

In studying the works of these early psychologists, Bernays (2004/1928) found insights into the development of his own propaganda models. Considering the new technologies of mass media, he applied tenets of group psychology to describe the process by which individual desires and beliefs are shaped to reflect those of others.

Bernays wondered, based on models of mass psychology, if mass media could be employed to shape public opinion in such a way that those subjected to propaganda would not be able to recognize it as such. In such a circumstance, he believed, the masses could be thoroughly indoctrinated, shaped, molded at the whims of the powerful. To Bernays, previous propaganda models have been far too direct, commanding, and obvious. He preferred a much more subtle approach that appeals to emotion instead of reason. How does this happen? By creating a story, a narrative, a picture; one that is filled with meaning, one that conveys clear messaging, but one that never contains a direct appeal to do anything other than what is natural. Essentially, Bernays advocated for creating an environment in which those targeted by propaganda would be begging to have what was offered, as opposed to being convinced to have it (Tye, 2002).

Bernays strongly believed in the importance of propaganda to the success of capitalism (Tye, 2002). This drove him to advertising, perhaps the most obvious place one would look to find propaganda today, and in this field, he was a master at crafting hidden narratives, subtle in design, containing visceral appeals to emotion that bypass rationality. For example, as reported in Chapter 1, in two of his most successful propaganda campaigns, Bernays successfully connected the suffrage/women's rights movement to the freedom women could demonstrate by smoking cigarettes. His advertising campaign for the American Tobacco Company started with a women's march during the Easter Parade on 5th Avenue in New York, 1930. Labelled their "Torches of Freedom" march, hundreds of women filled the street smoking cigarettes in public.

Due to the taboo against women smoking in public at the time, female smokers generally restricted their habit to inside their homes. But Bernays and American Tobacco Company realized the vast profits to be made if our culture sanctioned women smoking in public as well as at home. Not long after images of the march were distributed nationwide on the front pages of newspapers and magazines, women smoking in public quickly lost its taboo. Following this dramatic success, Bernays became so convinced of the power of media to shape public opinion, he asserted, “Age old customs, I learned, could be broken down by a dramatic appeal, distributed by the network of media.” (Bernays, 1965/1915, p. 387)

Bernays’ model quickly became the standard in the years following his successful *Torches of Freedom* campaign (Tye, 2002). Marketing of goods and services by propaganda in advertising became a key component of a capitalist economy. Where Bernays saw a manipulated, yet well managed and informed public, consuming and behaving in ways suitable for a capitalist society, linguist and intellectual Noam Chomsky saw something very different. Chomsky (2002/1991) believed there was something quite anti-capitalist and anti-democratic in the propaganda he was seeing in media. Regarding propaganda in advertising he asserts, “The advertising industry’s prime task is to ensure that uninformed consumers make irrational choices, thus undermining market theories that are based on just the opposite” (Chomsky, 2012). And for Chomsky, propaganda did not stop with advertising products. To Chomsky, the same forces of propaganda that shape capitalist consumption also shape public opinion about policy, and to him, represent a form of intellectual violence. “Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state.” (Chomsky, 2002/1991).

Chomsky’s work gives us an idea about the types of capitalist ideologies that we might expect to find in children’s media. The work illustrates how propaganda works to bound the

limits of discourse, express the ideologies of those with wealth and power, and create opposition to communism. Considering how power uses media to indoctrinate, understanding how these messages work in children's cartoons should be explored. Children have long been seen as a vast sea of consumers through their parent's money and continue to be the target of unrelenting advertising connected to the shows that they enjoy, but what capitalist ideologies are expressed through the programming itself? What are the values and norms that children take away from watching hours of cartoons? These questions are at the heart of what this study aims to explore.

Common Core Standards and Critical Literacy

Asking critical questions about media developed for and shared with young children is consistent with recent educational standards and an approach to texts known as critical literacy. For example, the Common Core Standards state explicitly that students who meet the standards will be equipped with various abilities, including that ability to critically engage with texts. From the Common Core ELA standards by The Council of Chief State School Officers (2010):

[Students will be able to] comprehend as well as critique. Students are engaged and open-minded – but discerning – readers and listeners. They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author's or speaker's assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and soundness of reasoning. (p. 7)

Language such as this is consistent with educational approaches sometimes referred to as critical literacy. While critical literacy does not have a fixed definition, there are common elements between different educational approaches to critical literacy. All of these approaches conceptualize the world as a text that is assembled socially that may be read and analyzed. According to Luke (2000), critical literacy is an examination of language that:

...focuses on teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position-taking with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work. (p. 460)

Within the critical literacy framework, it is important to teach students to ask questions about the text that relate to the author of the text, perspectives of characters in the text, the function of the text, the voices that you hear in the text, and those voices that you do not hear in the text (Soares & Watson, 2006).

Of course, the cartoons analyzed for this research are intended for children under 7 years old, and critical literacy standards are not specifically called out in the kindergarten and 1st grade standards. Standards for children around the ages of 5 or 6 generally focus on reading comprehension, vocabulary extension, and connections between visual and written elements. While critical literacy is not a strong focus in these early grades, the standards address important early skills that lay the foundation for future connections to a critical approach to texts.

It is important to examine texts, including multimedia texts, produced for young children for multiple reasons. First, although the standards may not explicitly call out these skills, young children can and often are already able to take a critical stance toward the media they consume. If adults have a more nuanced understanding of texts, they may be able to help students interpret or at least consider the narratives and images they consume. Second, it can be important to examine texts written for young children from a critical literacy perspective in order to better select texts for students that depict the richness and potential of the world they are growing into. Finally, the practice of critically examining texts with students on a consistent basis can encourage the development of the habit of taking this approach with all texts that they encounter.

Research on Ideology and Children's Media

With the historical background of how media has (and continues to be) used to shape public opinion, along with the work of Gerbner (2009) and Bandura (2009) providing a clear mechanism for the transmission of belief systems and values through media, a consideration of the ideologies and worldviews present in children's cartoon media can be undertaken. Much of that research focuses on media created by the Disney corporation and expressions of racial and gender stereotypes expressed in that media. Additional research, focusing on other expressions of ideology are also considered. Here, I will summarize that research.

One of the most prolific producers of children's cartoon media is the Walt Disney Corporation. With 59 released animated movies dating back to the 1937 release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Walt Disney Animation Studios has an extensive collection of media available for analysis. Although there is little work that takes a Marxist approach to content analysis of Disney cartoons, there are a number of published works that focus on various instances of social reproduction, including gender roles and sexual orientation, as well as research that considers the perpetuation of stereotypes in Disney animated media.

Gender Roles

Gender roles are often described as the ways of behaving for male and female individuals that are considered by society to be associated with each gender. These norms can and do change but are often stable for extended periods of time. Societal expectations for what is expected of males and females are embodied in and expressed through these norms and are reproduced through the stories that we tell to one another and in those we see in media.

Cultivation theory and Social Learning Theory work well to describe the mechanism by which the influence of the stories that children hear about gender and the roles that society

promotes for each gender. Children's worldviews and beliefs about gender are shaped at an early age by media, and children begin to express conformity to those norms at very early ages (Palmer, 2013). Society's (and often parental) expectations are revealed when daughters develop a preference for playing with dolls and make up, while boys play with toy guns and develop a love of sports. Reinforcing societal and parental pressures, children's peers may engage in bullying tactics when they observe violations of accepted gender norms. This threat contributes to reinforcement of gender norms (Gardner, 2015).

First Generation

The portrayal of female characters in Disney movies can be seen as both an evolution and an adherence to tradition. The evolution of female characters is apparent when considering the positioning of female characters in early movies and observing the change in how these characters are presented over decades of films. The earliest Disney films including *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* presented female characters as *damsels in distress* (Barber, 2015). These characters had little agency, were often treated as objects, and were relatively helpless, depending on strong, male characters for rescue or guidance. They dreamed of little other than being domesticated by a handsome prince. In contrast, male characters were depicted as handsome, heroic, and valiant rescuers who save the hapless females from their dire situation and are in turn rewarded for their valor with the true and undying love of a virtuous maiden (Barber, 2015).

Second Generation

A second generation of Disney princesses seemed, on the surface, to have a different perspective, however, the dominant message stayed the same. For example, Princess Ariel in the

Disney film *The Little Mermaid* asserts, “Who says that my dreams have to stay my dreams?” Her expression of heartfelt desire to fulfill her dreams represents an evolution of the presentation of female characters in Disney animated cartoons. These female characters were much more likely to challenge authority and demonstrate agency than in previous incarnations. In the film *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is presented as an ambitious free spirit, curious about the world above the sea. Not only is her manner of dress dramatically different than previous Disney princesses, (she is drawn with little clothing at all) she rejects her father’s authority as both a parent and king in order to seek happiness outside his kingdom, which eventually leads her to the surface and onto land, where she meets her prince (Garabedian, 2014). Although Ariel’s presentation was dramatically different from previous princesses, her dreams and goals came to be quite similar to those of the princesses of the previous era. Her happiness was again dependent on the love of a man, which she came to be her greatest wish. About Princess Ariel’s character, media critic Henry Giroux says, “Although girls might be delighted by Ariel’s teenage rebelliousness, they are strongly positioned to believe, in the end that desire, choice, and empowerment are closely linked to catching and loving a handsome man.” (Giroux, 1994, p. 34). He goes on to report that much like previous incarnations of Disney princesses, Ariel is a “metaphor for traditional housewife in the making.” (Giroux, 1994, p. 35).

Other Disney films from this era present similar personality traits for their princesses. Both *Mulan* and *Tangled* extend the trajectory that *The Little Mermaid* began in 1989. Each of the later films present strong female characters that demonstrate agency, independence, and strong sense of their desires and how to fulfill them—and also focus on romantic relationships that define the main characters.

Third Generation

Moving beyond the limited dream-seeking of second generation Disney princesses, Princess Merida, in *Brave* asserts, “There are those who say fate is something beyond our command. That destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it.” (Andrews et al., 2012) Merida sees her future not as hopeful dreams to be fulfilled, but as a shaping of a reality already within her.

This continued development of Disney princesses can be observed in modern films like *Brave* and *Frozen*. These films have decidedly independent female characters that do not need the approval or attention of men, although in *Frozen* there is a relationship and eventual marriage between one of the princesses, Anna, and a male character, Franz. This relationship is one that naturally develops through the course of the film and not a goal for the independent princess. The movie puts a twist on the original meaning of “true love” in Disney films. In the earliest era of Disney movies, “true love” was always sought by female characters in the form of a romantic relationship with a prince, but in *Frozen*, “true love” was recognized by Anna as the love that she had for her sibling Elsa (Barber, 2015). This new rendering of love, coupled with a distinct change in values for the princesses, where they no longer seek male characters to fulfill their lives, is a hallmark of modern Disney films and seems likely to further develop in later films.

As described in the research above, the presentation of female gender roles in Disney films has made a distinct and clear evolution since *Snow White* in the early 20th Century (Sarna, 2021). The progression of princesses from being defined by their submissive nature and desire for marriage, to the second generation’s more free-spirited princesses who still exhibited the desire for domestication, to the third generation’s independence, who no longer need a husband for fulfillment, is well defined.

Stereotypes

Some studies have pointed out the racial stereotypes in media for children created by Disney. For example, the early movies had little racial diversity, with an almost exclusively white cast. Snow White, in particular, demonstrated a strong association with whiteness of skin color and positive character traits (Higgs, 2016; Lewis, 2016). Later films include Asian stereotyped cats in *Lady and the Tramp* and *The Aristocats*, complete with yellow face. African American stereotypes are demonstrated in *Song of the South*, *Dumbo* (including a crow named Jim Crow), and *The Jungle Book*. And Native American stereotypes appear in *Peter Pan*, which includes a song that was originally called, “What Makes a Red Man Red?” before it was later changed to “What Makes a Brave Man Brave?” (Hayday, 2019; Sperb, 2010; Towbin et al., 2004).

According to Bilyk (2011), it was not until 1992 that Disney released an animated princess movie, *Aladdin*, with a princess that was non-white. And although the inclusion of a middle eastern Jasmine was a groundbreaking move toward a more diverse cast of princesses, she shared many character traits with previous princesses, including longing for a handsome man to rescue her from difficult situations and less agency than her male counterparts. In the next section, I will explore previous literature that has examined children’s cartoons as they address each of the five components of the framework for this study.

Capitalist Narratives in Children’s Cartoons

Longitudinal analysis of Disney films reflect a near century long process of freeing women from traditional roles in society along with the character and personality traits that are associated with those roles (Barber, 2015). While such analyses are important in understanding the evolution of social norms and their presentation in media, a Marxist critique is necessary to

uncover the limits of discourse that bound narratives found in mainstream children's cartoon media.

Although published works of Marxist analysis of children's cartoons are limited, there are a number of peer and non-peer reviewed articles that indicate this area of research would likely yield fruit. In studying the existing literature, several themes begin to emerge that represent narratives supportive of capitalism. These narratives can be seen as expressions of ideology representative of a meritocratic worldview decidedly within bounds of acceptable discourse in children's media which serve to influence viewers' values and beliefs. As summarized below, notable themes emerging in non-peer reviewed literature describe transactional relationships between individuals, consumerism, emphasis on the importance of property rights, individualism, entrepreneurship, and systems of hierarchy.

Entrepreneurship and Responsibility to Others in Duck Tales

The cartoon series Duck Tales, and its portrayal of Scrooge McDuck is an example of media for children that perpetuates a belief in a meritocratic economic system. Examinations of the portrayal of Scrooge McDuck demonstrates few cartoon characters embody this notion more completely than Scrooge McDuck (Dhieb, 2018), who declares his meritocratic worldview thusly, "I made my name by being tougher than the toughies, and smarter than the smarties and I made it square on my own!" (cited in Fandom, n.d.)

Scrooge McDuck became a widely popular after his introduction as Donald Duck's wealthy uncle in 1947. Originally intended by his creator Carl Barks to take part in a one-time story with his nephew Donald, Scrooge's nature and antics were so popular that he became a reoccurring character in Donald's life, eventually getting his own comic in 1949. It was in his personal comic series that his capitalist background began to take shape, as well as the

explanation for his incredible wealth. As explained in the August 1949 issue, Scrooge's entrepreneurship began by building his wealth through a process of colonization, where he violently removed indigenous people from their land in order to establish a rubber plantation using the native people as his laborers (Belk, 1987; Plummer, 2018). While more modern representations of Scrooge reimagine the origin of his wealth to be a series of menial labor jobs that he started as a young duck, where his work ethic, grit and intelligence propel him to riches, he still retains personality traits consistent with a strong belief in meritocracy that tends to frame the poor as less deserving (Willits et al, 2003). On Scrooge's ethics, creator Carl Barks explained in an interview:

They say that wealthy people like the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers are sinful because they accumulated fortunes by exploiting the poor. A little exploitation is something you come by in nature. We see it in the pecking order of animals – everybody has to be exploited or to exploit someone else to a certain extent. I don't resent those things.

(Willits et al., 2003, p. 11)

Authority Figures in Disney Animated Movies

According to researcher Artz (2003) media plays a role in this normalization, and Disney cartoons demonstrate strong narratives supportive of hierarchy. In describing Disney's role in normalizing hierarchy, Artz asserted:

Disney consistently and intentionally selects themes in its commodities-as-animated features that promote an ideology useful to Disney and capitalist society, but at odds with democratic, creative communities. Disney's animated features simultaneously soften and distribute messages of class hierarchy and anti-social hyper-individualism. (Artz, 2003, p.

1)

In Artz' (2003) textual analysis of several of the most popular Disney animated films, he identified four ideological themes that were apparent in each of the films, which were supportive of capitalist ideology. These themes include, "1) the naturalization of hierarchy; 2) the defense of elite coercion and power; 3) the promotion of hyper-individualism; and 4) the denigration of democratic solidarity." (Artz, 2003, p. 6)

Complementing Artz's research, Pegoda (2017), showed how Disney animated films normalize hierarchy, with each of the animated features providing a different façade for hierarchy, but the structure remaining apparent and well defined. About this structure, Pegoda (2017) asserts that the films "teach people to be complacent under a dictator" (para. 3). *The Lion King* depicts Mufasa as king of the savanna, noble, honorable, strong, drawn with supple curves and muscular limbs. Contrasted with the villainous Scar, who is darker, angular, and slothful. All other animals in the land bow down to him except the hyenas, who are depicted as savage, squabbling idiots. The movie depicts the sun shining down from on high on the face of Simba when he is born as if implying the divine right of the next king. Other than the hyenas, only the villainous Scar seems to question the social order of the savanna. The power relations are clear from both the visual depictions and the narrative (Roth, 1996).

Artz also found similar narratives in *Aladdin*. Set in a feudalistic society, with the Sultan's palace surrounded by unethical merchants, poverty, and homelessness, the main character Aladdin discovers a magical lamp that aids him in rescuing princess Jasmine and saving the Sultan from assassination by a Scar-like villain in character and presentation. Aladdin's goal is not to use the power of the lamp to overthrow the unjust feudal system, but to save his love interest and restore things to normal, which only serves to leave the system of oppression intact (Artz, 2003).

According to researchers Chomsky and Waterstone (2021), capitalism depends on the type of systems of authority described above. Deference to authority figures in the workplace is the norm, and although our society espouses a love for democratic values, the place where most of us spend 40 hours or more each week, is more dictatorial than the Soviet Union under Stalin (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021). In his latest, book *Consequences of Capitalism: Manufacturing Discontent and Resistance*, Chomsky described the authoritarian nature of the workplace as follows:

When you rent yourself to some concentration of capital in the private sector—that’s what taking a job is—you’re giving your life over to a dictatorship, in fact, an extreme form of a dictatorship that reaches far beyond political dictatorships. The tyranny to which you are handing yourself over to has almost total control over you. It controls every minute of your working day: what you wear and are allowed to say, when you’re allowed to get a bathroom break, how your hands and legs move... Just about everything in your life is controlled by this extreme dictatorship, which goes far beyond any totalitarian dictatorship in the degree of control it exercises. (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021, p. 86)

Lessons about Right and Wrong in Children’s Media

Crime in American media is usually an exercise in replicating the dominant narrative in our society. This replication of dominant narratives about crime often decontextualizes the violence present in depictions of criminal activity such that “violence is depicted for violence’s sake and the meaning associated with it is at best ideologically superficial and at worst ideologically manipulative” (Kort-Butler, 2012, p. 568), rendering crime as a product to be consumed by audiences, or as Presdee (2000) describes, “all that is left of crime is excitement

and desire as crime itself becomes transformed into a commodity” (p. 26) without its causes and consequences (Shanahan, 2004). For example, “real life” crime drama programs like *Cops* or *America’s Most Wanted* focus exclusively on the criminal acts taking place. Context about the background or motivations of the individuals committing the act are often ignored, but when they are present, they are usually superficial and do little to create any empathy or understanding that one might otherwise have for the offending person were a fully contextualized understanding of the offence be presented. So, the replication of dominant ideologies about crime through media does little to create understanding about the causes of crime, which can result in a “tough on crime” society without compassion for those who break the law. And when those audiences are children whose experience with even the idea of crime is limited, media shapes their values and belief systems in a way even more powerful than it would for adult viewers (Kort-Butler, 2012).

In media, crime is often commodified for viewers and presented to them as a function of the mainstream view of crime in the United States. According to Hagan (2010), the 1980s saw a significant shift in society’s perspective about individuals who commit crimes in that they began to be seen as rational actors who choose to violate the law of their own accord, irrespective of their circumstances or life experiences. Under this paradigm, punishments are intended to be harsh, possibility of rehabilitation ignored or considered ineffective, and considerations of the fundamental causes of crime marginalized (Unnever & Cullen, 2010). Lawbreakers are cast as solely and personally responsible for their choices, with personal flaws or character defects often to blame. And if the individual’s choices appear irrational, then the offenders are said to be *evil* or *insane*, labels often used in place of considering social factors for the reason for the offense (Garland, 2001; Presdee, 2000).

Manifestations of the dominant ideology are clear in children's cartoon media. Villains in some of the most popular superhero cartoon media, like *Batman* and *Superman*, are universally presented as having complete agency and culpability for their crimes regardless of their rationale for committing those crimes (Vollum & Adkinson, 2003). Greed, selfishness, or some form of personal gain, stemming from a defect in character, are often presented as reasons for the crime. Mental illness or insanity are also presented frequently in these cartoons as contributing factors to wrongdoing. In this framing, lawbreakers are considered to be different than the rest of us. This othering of perpetrators of crime sets them apart from us, and in doing so, establishes conditions that favor harsh punishment without consideration of rehabilitation. Conditions of poverty and associated environmental circumstances may be present but are never seen as the source of anti-social behaviors on the part of the villains (Stoddart, 2006). But regardless of the presented rationale, nothing is sufficient to mitigate the personal responsibility each lawbreaker must bear.

Consumerism and Materialism in Children's Media

Materialism has many definitions, but for the purposes of this research can be defined as the value that individuals place on material possessions, the place that these possessions have in their lives, and the emotions generated by having or not having them (Belk, 1985). These emotions are associated with a worldview that "views material goods and money as important to personal happiness" (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 307), and are often coupled with personal character traits of envy and non-generosity (Belk, 1985).

According to Lipscomb (1988), both materialism and media consumption increase with age, with older children much more likely to discuss material possessions or products than younger children in conversations. This increased "exposure to television appears to facilitate

materialistic attitudes and adolescents' social motivations for consumption (i.e. self-expressions through possessions or conspicuous consumption)." (Achenreiner, 1997, p. 83)

The promotion of materialistic values to children through cartoons is most obviously seen through toy lines associated with characters, things, and environments from the cartoons. This type of marketing to children is a well-documented success story, from breakfast cereals to action figures, in advertising. This kind of messaging includes commercials with cartoon characters designed to be appealing to children, like Captain Crunch, Tony the Tiger, and Chester Cheetah. These characters appear repeatedly over the course of children's daily viewing and serve to promote materialism and consumption (Taylor, 2012).

Other Content Analysis Media Studies

Earlier studies of media (Cissel 2012; Taylor, 2018; Wang, 2017; Webster et al., 2020) have also used content analysis to explore the narratives present in a range of texts, including print media, television, and online dialogue. An examination of these studies illustrate how media narratives are used to shape public opinion about a wide variety of issues, including the 2011 Occupy Movement, the opioid crisis, mass surveillance through drug testing, and victimhood in reports of stabbing incidences between Israelis and Palestinians. These studies point out four ways media shapes narratives including differences in reporting between mass media and alternative media, differences in the framing of victims, gradual manipulation of narratives, and greater-good framing. Each of these is described below.

Differences in reporting between mass media and alternative media was demonstrated in a study of the Occupy Movement, with mass media presenting a different perspective on the protestors than alternative media. Cissel (2012) defined mass media as "large influential news conglomerates that underwent mergers in the U.S. after the Telecommunications Act of 1996"

(p. 70) and alterative news media as “media that often aims to challenge existing powers, represent marginalized groups, and to foster horizontal linkages among communities of interest” (p. 70). According to her research, mass media often presented protestors as rag-tag, unorganized groups without clear goals. Mass media often framed the protests as confusing and chaotic with possible criminal elements. Alternate media presented a deeper analysis of the same protests that included Occupy’s goals and generally portrayed the movement in a more positive light than mass media. To explain the differences in reporting, Cissel identified an agenda-driven bias in mass media that was due to the ties that board members of mass media conglomerates had to major US banking and industries.

Another tactic employed by news media to shape public beliefs is represented by the framing of victimhood. Wang (2017) employed content analysis to better understand the narratives presented by British media during a six-month period of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. According to Wang, during this period in reporting violent incidences between Israelis and Palestinians the Palestinians were always framed as either unworthy victims or violent initiators and Israelis always framed positively. Similar framing is often seen in US media in reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, echoing Chomsky’s (2002) critique of news media and their constructions of worthy and unworthy victims. Wang attributed the source of the media framing to be a reflection of the political environment in Britain, which represents the transmission of values from the ruling class to society through the medium of mass media.

The gradual manipulation of narratives in media represents a shifting of the narrative about an issue over time. The development of this tactic is well demonstrated by a recent study by Webster et al. (2020). Their research focused on the media representation of the opioid crisis in North America from the years 2000 to 2017. Through those years, media narratives about

opioid use transformed from positive framing that centered on the safety of opioids and the need for such medicines in the management of pain in the early 2000s to a negative framing that focused on addiction, criminality, and deaths due to overdose by 2017. The gradual transformation of the narrative was paralleled by a mounting urgency in tone from the necessary use of a medication to improve the quality of life for those suffering chronic pain to a full blown crisis of addiction and death. The authors go on to note the “neoliberal focus on personal responsibility permeates much of the media reporting” (Webster et al., p. 7, 2020), and also go on to allude to potential connections between pharmaceutical companies and media conglomerates that support the positive framing of opioids early in the crisis.

The framing of the greater good in media is usually supported by something feared by the public. In order to prevent some disaster from happening, society must accept some kind of violation of rights, privacy intrusion, or circumstance that goes against what they might otherwise accept in the absence of a threat. A 2018 content analysis of Australian newspapers by Taylor (2018) illustrated how media promoted a mass surveillance drug testing program for students for their overall wellbeing. Despite the fact that these kind of drug testing schemes have not demonstrated effectiveness, students were expected to sacrifice some level of their personal right to privacy for their own health. Taylor’s (2018) content analysis indicated that media privileged voices that were pro-testing over those that were not. Pro-testing voices often described the testing as a necessary evil that protects students from falling into drug addiction and bad health. Voices of students were heard in only a minority of media sources, indicating that the media valued the opinions of those most affected by the policy less than that of those who were implementing it (Taylor, 2018). Appeals to the greater good have been seen in media

in every expansion of the surveillance state. Media always presents us with some threat that can only be mitigated by the sacrifice of some amount of freedom or privacy.

Current Study

Mittell's (2009) funhouse media mirror tells that grit, determination, and work ethic are keys to achieving the American Dream for ourselves. In this distorted reflection, success is a function of effort, privilege does not exist, villains are to be held accountable despite environment, and character means following the rules. Economic mobility data says otherwise. Of adolescents born into the lowest economic quintile in the US, 60% will remain in the lowest or second lowest quintile as adults, with only 7% able to move into the top quintile (Athreya et al., 2016). If the narrative is not benefitting the working class, then who does it most benefit? Who would benefit from millions of people who believe the American Dream?

This study is about the application of a Marxist lens in recognizing expressions of capitalist ideology that are present in children's cartoon media. Specifically, this research seeks to understand the messaging of capitalist ideology in children's cartoons, and the prevalence of those messages. Often when a story is told many times in many different ways, the curriculum of the story becomes hidden, assumptions go unrecognized, framing goes unchallenged. Based on theories of media propaganda and social theories of learning, this research will explore the curriculums that children are exposed to when they tune in to some of their favorite cartoons. These stories shape the belief systems of children and should be understood and recognized as having tremendous power. Nothing else influences actions and behaviors more than our belief systems and understanding why we believe the things that we do is a vital element in critical thought and to understanding ourselves. This analysis may benefit teachers and parents who read

or watch texts with children and provide a framework for thinking about how inequitable structures of capitalist ideology are maintained.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Questions

As described in Chapter 1, the purpose of this Marxist content analysis is to identify and describe the ideologies presented to viewers in a selection of popular children's cartoons that appear on major television networks. Taking a qualitative approach through the lens of Marxist content analysis to understand and contextualize these ideologies, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do cartoons targeted to preschool children portray social and economic systems?
2. What explicit and implicit messages do these cartoons convey about relationships with authority figures, consumerism, entrepreneurship, right and wrong behaviors, and responsibility to others?

Qualitative Research

Content analysis, a text-based form of qualitative research, was used to answer these research questions. According to Crozier et al. (1994), qualitative research represents the study of concepts in their usual setting. Through this process, qualitative researchers strive to understand these concepts based on meanings that are attributed to them. In other words, qualitative research is:

...an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. This research builds a complex, holistic

picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 1998, p. 15)

For this study, a qualitative approach was most appropriate because it seeks to understand a distinctly human, social process by which ideology is transmitted between groups and individuals through the medium of television. Meeting Creswell's (1998) definition of qualitative research above, this investigation sought to build a holistic picture of the messages expressing this ideology through textual analysis that relies on a subjective understanding of the content and the context. The data collected took the form of codes that were categorized in a way that was responsive to the research questions described above. The coding process was necessarily qualitative because of the subjective understandings necessary for categorization.

Qualitative Content Analysis

While all qualitative methods enabled the researcher to take an inquiry-based approach to data analysis, the textual nature of this study required a specific type of qualitative research. In order to fulfill the purpose of this study and to find answers to the research questions, content analysis was used as the methodology. Content analysis can be described as a "systemic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics" (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 1) The specific form of content analysis used was qualitative content analysis. Having roots in the social sciences and critical theory, qualitative content analysis methodologies have commonalities that include a close reading of text and interpretation of that text into narratives (Creswell, 2003; Krippendorff, 2004).

Qualitative content analysis represents a research method that, while having similarities to quantitative content analysis, is distinct in allowing for an interpretation of messages in text (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). For example, quantitative content analysis is often used to count

the number of occurrences of specific phrases. These phrases are known and understood prior to the analysis, so the objective is to determine their presence or absence in the text. In contrast, qualitative content analysis does not start with specific phrases in mind when approaching a text. Words and phrases that meet certain criteria are extracted from the text during the analysis. These criteria or categories may be determined beforehand or during the analysis, but they are always interpreted to determine how they should be categorized in qualitative content analysis. Additionally, due to the deductive nature of quantitative content analysis, sampling is usually done randomly in order to test hypotheses and to support the validity of statistical assertions made about the text (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In contrast, qualitative content analysis often employs selective sampling in order to most effectively address the research questions being investigated. Each of these methods results in a distinctly different product. While quantitative content analysis produces numerical results on which statistical analysis may be run, qualitative content analysis produces “descriptions or typologies, along with expressions from subjects reflecting how they view the social world. By this means, the perspectives of the producers of the text can be better understood” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 2). For the purposes of this research, it was necessary to go beyond the counting of words or phrases because no single word or phrase could be classified into the capitalist narratives being explored without a close reading for understanding the context in which the dialogue took place. Additionally, because the sampling of this research was of children’s cartoons, images often convey much of the story and also needed to be interpreted along with the dialogue in order to understand the narrative that was expressed. With this type of text and resulting product, qualitative content analysis was well suited to provide the means by which to explore expressions of capitalist ideology in children’s cartoons.

Marxist Content Analysis

The power of any form of content analysis to provide meaningful textual analysis lies in five advantages unique to the method (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). First, the unobtrusive nature of the method focuses on texts, as opposed to other qualitative methods that require field work observations or interviews. Content analysis may be undertaken without Institutional Review Board approval because human subjects are not necessary. Second, qualitative content analysis can be easily coupled with other qualitative methods to provide a deeper understanding of interviews or observations than either of those methods alone. Third, content analysis is not limited to present day research. Texts from any time period may be analyzed, as long as context of those texts can be understood. Fourth, as long as access to the required texts is not restricted, content analysis is one of the most efficient research methods, because there are no issues like scheduling conflicts or the need to spend time recruiting human subjects. Fifth, because access to texts can be readily available, the research can be easily replicated (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

While content analysis has many strengths, there are also several weaknesses that should be considered when choosing this research method. First, the method is not dynamic in nature, in that there are no interactions between the researcher and sample. The static nature of text limits the potential for any clarifying questions or follow up that is inherent in other qualitative methodologies. Second, internal validity assumes the classification of data would take place in an analogous manner for different researchers. This assumption may or may not be true, which could bring into question the validity of the research if the latter is the case. Third, in some situations only texts that are considered the most important are saved. If researchers only have access to those texts for their research, conclusions drawn may be incomplete. Fourth, context analysis cannot establish a cause and effect relationship between anything. The method's power

is in the identification of patterns and inferences made from those patterns that may be used to draw reasonable conclusions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). While the limitations of content analysis are clear, the method remains the most appropriate way to identify and describe capitalist ideology in children's cartoons.

Conceptual Framework

The contribution of a Marxist lens to content analysis relates to the understanding of power relationships between ruling class and those ruled. According to Allen (2017) Marxist analysis:

...is a method by which researchers expose how communication phenomena influence taken-for-granted assumptions regarding who “ought to be” and “ought not to be” empowered in a given society with a particular focus on socioeconomic status, materialism, and consumerism. The principles undergirding Marxist analysis were first proposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who argued that the thoughts and beliefs of the ruling class tend to be accepted both by those in power and those disempowered by them. Thus, the underlying goal of a Marxist analysis is to reveal the ways in which communication practices, events, interactions, and texts help create, maintain, or transform social and/or political oppression. (para. 1)

By applying this lens through a content analysis methodology, this study hoped to illuminate the assumptions of empowerment that are expressed through the ideologies in children's cartoons, which have the effect of maintaining the social structures necessary for a capitalist system. And in employing a Marxist lens in this way, this study sought to address the research questions described at the beginning of this chapter. Those questions include references to narratives outlined in the conceptual framework, particularly narratives related to:

- Authority Figures – This theme represents individuals whose directives are expected to be followed by other individuals and individuals’ responses to those authority figures or cases where authority is no present.
- Consumerism – This theme represents depictions of individuals as consumers any may include expressed desire for goods or services or completing tasks in order to be rewarded with goods or services or a rejection of consumerism and concepts such as sharing and giving away material goods.
- Entrepreneurship – This theme represents situations in which an individual is depicted as owning or seeking to own a business and challenges to entrepreneurship or economic behaviors based on the public good.
- Right and Wrong Behaviors – This theme is represented by situations in which an individual is taught a lesson about ethics or morality.
- Responsibility to Others – This theme is represented by depictions of individualism and/or collectivism that could also include references to or about society in general and the expectations that individuals should have of government and as members of a society.

Data Sources

This study focused on cartoons targeted to preschoolers based on their popularity. My goal was to select series based on popularity under the assumption that the most popular/most viewed might have the largest impact on children. In 2023, children consume media on multiple broadcast platforms in many ways, including television, streaming to handheld devices, or on computers over internet connection. Traditional rating systems like Nielsen might not represent

the most viewed series. After speaking with a communications and media studies scholar (K. Williams, personal communication, February 17, 2022), I determined that a definitive source of popularity did not exist for preschool children’s cartoon media. For this study, I selected media for analysis based on a popularity ranking published on IMDb.com (“100 Greatest TV Shows”, 2022). IMDb.com is an online database of ratings for television programming, movies, streaming, and video games that has been collecting data on these forms of media since 1990. Currently owned by Amazon, IMDb has 83 million registered users and a database that contains over 8.7 million titles, according to their internal data. IMDb publishes a list they call the *100 Greatest Children TV Shows*, which is “a list of the best TV for kids based on popularity, positive reviews, cultural influence, importance, and accolades” (“100 Greatest TV Shows”, 2022, para. 1). Not all shows in the list fit into the characteristics that I considered for this research, due to being live action or being outside the designated age range. I selected the top five shows in the list that were animated, had a rating of Y (indicating targeting of ages 2-6), and had the most recent new episodes broadcast no more than 5 years ago. The five series also represented a range of genders and races and ethnicities of main and supporting characters. Table 1 describes the data sources for this study including the series title, the production company and distribution network, a short description of the series, and the number, race/ethnicity, and gender of main and supporting characters.

Sample and Data Collection Procedures

Because all of these series were on streaming platforms, as well as broadcast television, any episode might have been watched at any time, so there was no way to know which individual episode had the most viewership. Therefore, the five episodes chosen for the sample were randomly selected from all episodes that first aired in the last 8 years (see description of

sampling procedure below). Five episodes of each series represented approximately 2.5 hours of dialogue for each series, and 12.5 hours of dialogue overall and was sufficient to understand the curriculum expressed in these cartoons.

Table 1

Television Programs Included in this Study and a Description of Each

Program Name	Production Company/ Network	Description	Main Character Race and Gender	Supporting Characters' Race and Gender
<i>Elena of Avalor</i>	Disney Television Animation/ Disney	Adventures of a Latina princess, her royal family, and friends. Action series that focuses on Elena's growth to become queen.	1 Latina female	Many male and female Latino characters with a minority of white and black characters
<i>Arthur</i>	WGBH /PBS	Elementary school children and their neighborhood adventures. School plays a central role in the series, with much action at school.	8 male, 10 female, all animals	Many supporting animals
<i>Curious George</i>	Imagine Entertainment/ Peacock (Formerly PBS Kids)	Stories of a curious monkey who gets into trouble, but always learns an important lesson.	1 white male and 1 monkey	Many animals and people of different races and genders
<i>Sophia the First</i>	Disney Television Animation/ Disney	A young commoner girl who became a princess when her mother married a king.	1 white female	4 white males and 2 white females
<i>Doc McStuffins</i>	Brown Bag Films/ Disney	A young girl imagines following in the footsteps of her pediatrician mother and applies her medical knowledge to help cure the sicknesses of her stuffed animals.	1 black female	1 lack male, 1 black female, and many stuffed animals

Table 2

Episode List and Key

Series Name	Episodes
<i>Elena of Avalor</i>	To Queen or Not to Queen (E1) (Ruderman & Pratt, 2020) A Spy in the Palace (E2) (Ruderman & Pratt, 2017) First Day of Rule (E3) (Gerber & Mitchell, 2016) All Kingdoms Fair (E4) (Rogers & Pratt, 2018) Norberg Peace Prize (E5) (Ruderman & Chew, 2019)
<i>Sofia the First</i>	Minding the Manor (S1) (Tucker & Michell, 2015) The Crown of Blossoms (S2) (Carlisle & Mitchell, 2017) A Tale of Two Teams (S3) (Stern, Mitchell, Leichliter, 2015) The Secret Library (S4) (Mejia & Mantta, 2016) Bad Little Dragon (S5) (Gerber & Mitchell, 2015)
<i>Doc McStuffins</i>	Wrong Side of the Law (D1) (Hamburg, 2014) Doc's Busy Day (D2) (Riley, 2014) Demitri the Dazzling (D3) (Riley, 2015) Selfless Snowman (D4) (Lieuwen, 2016) Ultimate Safari: Stuffie's Safari (D5) (Barnes & Stern, 2019)
<i>Arthur</i>	The Princess Problem (A1) (Hoverman & Bailey, 2018) Arthur's Big Meltdown (A2) (Lesser, Ruby, & Bailey, 2021) Muffy's House Guests (A3) (Smith & Bailey, 2019) Arthur's Toy Trouble (A4) (Scarborough & Bailey, 2016) Francine's Cleats of Strength (A5) (Hoverman & Bailey, 2016)
<i>Curious George</i>	George of the Desert (C1) (Purdy & Svislowski, 2021) George Saves a Tree (C2) (Goode & Svislowski, 2020) Orange Crush (C3) (Tately & Svislowski, 2019) Monkey Market (C4) (Lesser, Ruby, & Heming, 2019) George Serves It Up (C5) (Berg & Svislowski, 2021)

Procedure and Data Collection

In order to determine the overall potential sample, I used IMDb.com to generate a list of all episodes with initial air date as of March 15, 2014 or later. Each episode was given an episode number beginning with 1 for the earliest episode and continued until the most recent episode as of March 2022. Using a random number generator, I produced a set of five numbers for each series. Episodes corresponding to each generated random number were included in the study sample.

Transcripts of each episode from the sample were downloaded from either the show's official transcript page or from the Fandom.com when possible. Fandom is a website that hosts individual wikis (collections of user-generated content) for individual series and other types of entertainment including news, episode summaries, and, in most cases, transcripts created and posted by fans. If no transcript existed at Fandom.com, I consulted other online transcript hosting services to obtain a transcript. In the event that an online transcript was not available, I generated a transcript myself.

Each transcript retrieved from an online source was verified during the first viewing. I made corrections to the transcript if any were needed during this viewing. If transcripts were not available, then the episode was transcribed manually during this viewing. Along with the transcripts of verbal communications and dialogues between characters, notes were also made about any relevant mannerisms or environmental visual content that was relevant to the interactions. Because subtle cues or nuance might have been missed with only one viewing, each episode in the sample was viewed three times, with the transcripts being modified or elaborated each viewing as needed. Written transcripts took the form of a three-column table, with a timestamp and person speaking in the first column, dialogue and relevant notes about mannerisms or the environment in the second column. Table 2 shows a transcript sample. After data collection is complete, the data were coded into the categories described in in the following section. Code length fell into a range of a few words to complete sentences.

Table 3

Episode Transcript Sample

00:15:51 Muffy:	Daddy says I can have a celebrity chef and a makeup artist to do face paint. It'll be the best party ever.	<i>The episode begins in Muffy's game room, Muffy and Francine sit in chairs while Brain and Buster play air hockey and Arthur admires his new Bionic Bunny sneakers.</i>
00:15:57 Francine:	Isn't the party for the new showroom at Crosswire Motors?	
00:16:01 Muffy:	Well, yes, but Daddy wants me to have fun, too.	
00:16:05 Buster:	Whoo-hoo! Did you see that goal?	<i>Buster scores against Brain.</i>
00:16:08 Arthur:	Huh?	
00:16:09 Brain:	I think someone is a little too busy admiring his new sneakers.	<i>Bailey brings a trolley with smoothies.</i>
00:16:13 Muffy:	Kale smoothies, boys?	
00:16:15 Buster:	Sure!	
00:16:15 Arthur:	Okay, thanks!	<i>Arthur takes a kale smoothie off of a tray carried by Bailey.</i>
00:16:16 Buster:	Okay, next point wins the game.	<i>Arthur takes a drink of his smoothie and looks down at his sneakers.</i>
00:16:26 Buster:	Whoa!	<i>The air hockey puck flies upwards off the game table and lands in a glass of smoothie, causing it to splash over Arthur's sneakers.</i>
00:16:28 Arthur:	Gasps...Grr...	
00:16:30 Brain:	Yeah!	
00:16:31 Arthur:	(angrily) You ruined them! You ruined my new shoes!	
00:16:35 Brain:	We did? What happened?	

Data Analysis

Analysis of the selected cartoons in the sample first proceeded by a close reading of the transcribed data. During a second close reading of each transcript, I searched for text that might have aligned with the conceptual framework described above and described in more detail below. During coding, I employed a coding procedure recommended by Krippendorff (2004) as I:

1. Found major themes during a close reading
2. Consolidated overlapping or duplicate themes
3. Identified any themes that were not included in the coding categories
4. Drew conclusions from the thematic categories in the texts to the ideologies expressed.

Data analysis took place in the context of a directed content analysis. Directed content analysis depended on the underlying theory or conceptual framework that served to direct the initial coding, with additional themes arising as I engaged with the texts. This process allowed me to provide support for my conceptual framework or to demonstrate weaknesses in it (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Using codes allowed me to conceptualize the data and was vital to data analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Codes are “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2015, p. 3). By employing codes, I was able to categorize the data and understand connections between ideas. Essentially, coding “leads you from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all of the data pertaining to that idea” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p.137).

I coded for this project using a deductive approach with thematic coding based on my conceptual framework. Deductive approaches to content analysis are inherent to the directed method and rely on existing theory. Deductive approaches are more prone to bias than inductive approaches, and I mitigated the possibility of bias by including themes that might be pro-Marxist or anti-capitalist in the conceptual framework. In order to strengthen trustworthiness of the study, each of the five categories in the conceptual framework includes for the possibility of observing either pro or anti-capitalist messages. These messages were coded for analysis in the same

manner as pre-capitalist messages. For example, both consumerist and non-consumerist dialogue or situations were coded for, with the distinction between these two, as well as other opposing narratives, discussed below.

Conceptual Framework

This research consists of a Marxist content analysis of television cartoons targeted to children in the age range of 2-6 years old and their curriculum about social and economic systems. The study sought to identify how the cartoons portray elements of the conceptual framework in ways related to length of time, positive or negative portrayal, how much of the episode is dedicated to them, which characters are engaging in these actions, and the consequences of the actions. Messages related to the following concepts were categorized:

- Relationship to Authority Figures
- Consumerism
- Entrepreneurship
- Lessons about Right and Wrong
- Responsibility to Others

Relationship to Authority Figures. As defined above, situations and circumstances that depicted a figure in a position of authority giving directives to another figure qualified for coding in this category, or situations where an authority figure is not present when might otherwise be expected also qualified. Situations where authority was challenged or rejected were also included for coding. Dialogue containing references to “boss”, “employee”, “servant”, “leader”, “officer”, or other label that signifies a ranking qualified. Depictions of this category included visual cues

of authority such as uniforms, crowns, or other regalia that signifies hierarchy. Exclusions included parental relationships and other guardianship relations.

Consumerism. As defined above, consumerism was represented by situations in which a character was depicted as desiring an item that they did not own, which qualified for coding in this category. This included situations where one character was jealous of another character's possessions, where a character was saving money to purchase an item they desired, or where a character mentioned that they wished to have something that they did not own. Representations of non-consumerism were also included, particularly when consumerism was rejected by characters in favor of minimalism or a non-materialistic philosophy. Visual depictions of such desires were also subject to inclusion in this category, with possible examples including longing looks or ogling of some object. Exclusions included the desire of basic needs and necessities of life, including food, shelter, and basic clothing.

Entrepreneurship. As defined above, entrepreneurship often manifested as the depiction of business ownership. In order to be coded in this category, a business owner was depicted along with some service or good being sold, discussions about buying or selling goods or services were held, or discussions about starting a business took place. Other forms of economic activity were also coded for when entrepreneurship was rejected in favor of worker owned businesses or non-profit charities.

Lessons about Right and Wrong. As defined above, coding for lessons about right and wrong focused on rule breaking of any kind and were noted when character dialogue referenced violations of law, social norms, or accepted behaviors. Situations where rule breaking was encouraged or not punished were also included. Punishments or a lack of punishments for

violations of rules were also coded. These punishments took place in the form of dialogue with other characters or a narrative in the story that was unfavorable to the rule breaking character.

Responsibility to Others. As defined above, coding for responsibility to others focused on character dialogue that involved preference for individual action as opposed to collective action. Dialogue that encouraged characters to accomplish tasks without assistance was coded for. Additionally, competitive scenarios where an individual achieved victory through mainly his or her own work were considered in this category. Any situations where a character accomplished a goal without the assistance of others and this fact was remarked on were considered for this category. Additionally, alternative situations where characters accomplish goals in groups or with help from others were coded. Exclusions were menial tasks commonly undertaken in the cartoon that did not reference an individual accomplishment.

Researcher Bias

While my reasons for conducting this research may seem anti-capitalist, this was not my primary motivation. Although I approached this from a Marxist perspective, the larger concern to me is how our beliefs as a society are shaped. I believe true freedom of thought can only happen in individuals who recognize the stories that they hear always contain messages about how the world works, and it is my hope that the framework of this research might be used by educators and parents to practice and teach critical literacy skills at home and in the classroom. The curriculum expressed in these cartoons may or may not be a reflection of reality, but it must be recognized in order for the individual that make that evaluation. To me, the extent to which an individual has the ability to recognize and evaluate narratives, particularly the dominant narratives in society, is what critical thinking means. Asking two questions: what and why are

necessary to the process. What message or messages am I the target of? And why am I the target of this message? In order to exercise critical thought, the application of those two questions must inform their evaluation. If you do not recognize the message, then you cannot evaluate it and will passively accept it. If you do not understand why you are the target of the message, then you cannot evaluate it because you do not understand the context or motivations behind the message. How you evaluate the message after you understand what it is and why you are the target of it is for you to decide. For this study, I chose to evaluate those messages with a Marxist lens because it represents my worldview. Other lenses would likely give a different perspective on the same messages.

While this research is informed by a Marxist critique of capitalism, including the conceptualization, purpose, and research questions, the Marxist and anti-capitalist disposition of the primary researcher did not conflict with the coding or analysis of the data. Coding of the data, while subjective, was based on clear definitions of the themes and concepts addressed earlier in this paper. All coding for this research was based on those definitions.

Validity

In order to strengthen the validity of content analysis research, coders other than the primary researcher are often employed. This validation strategy involves other individuals coding the data based on rules specified by the researcher. This validation technique works well for quantitative content analysis where the rules are objective and straightforward, as when searching for pre-determined words or phrases. The subjective nature of qualitative content analysis requires the method be modified in order to maintain its efficacy. For this research project, one of my committee members was provided with examples of my coding process. We discussed differences in coding choices until consensus was reached, thereby clarifying coding

procedures. This process was used for initial codes and for codes that emerged during data analysis.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

This analysis explores a number of themes in 25 episodes of children's cartoons related to the categories described in Chapter 3. I first explore how authoritarianism is portrayed in these cartoons through relationships and imagery and then consider the framing of authoritarianism as both natural and good. Secondly, I explore consumerism and how the desire of material goods is portrayed. Third, as with authoritarianism, I consider the framing of entrepreneurship as both natural and positive. Fourth, lessons about right and wrong are considered, with themes related to work, sharing, and honesty. Finally, I explore depictions of responsibility to others, with a focus on individualism versus collectivism, helping others, and selfishness.

Table 2, above, provides a list of the episode names, dates, and creators (writers, directors) of each episode, and full citations for each of the 25 episodes are listed in the bibliography. Although each episode has a unique set of writers and directors, I assume that the series overall are supervised by producers and that episodes represent the entire series, rather than single writer or director. For this reason, I have only referred to each episode's titles in the findings below and the remainder of the dissertation.

Relationship to Authority Figures

As described in the research questions framing this study, explicit and implicit messages about social systems are explored. In this case, authoritarian social systems between individuals from the five cartoons indicated three distinct themes embodied in the narratives and imagery of

the episodes. These themes include authoritarian imagery, authoritarianism as a part of the natural order, and authoritarianism as beneficial to society. In the episodes analyzed for this research, authoritarian imagery can often be seen through visual representations that symbolically express forms of hierarchy, while other authoritarian themes may not be explicitly expressed through an overarching message, but portrayed as taken for granted, in the background, as part of a beneficial and/or natural order.

Authoritarian Imagery

Authoritarian imagery is a theme represented in multiple series, but might be best seen in *Elena of Avalor*, which presents numerous opportunities for analysis of these symbols. As discussed previously, Elena is the crown princess of the fictional Kingdom of Avalor. Her parents are deceased, and she is to assume the crown when she comes of age. The series relates her adventures and experiences that serve to shape and prepare her in becoming queen. The show's messages about authoritarianism are demonstrated in multiple ways, including imagery and the overarching and reoccurring plot of a focus on the changes Elena will face when she grows up and becomes Queen.

This series presents clear differences in attire between those in authority positions and those of subordinates. For example, in the premier episode "First Day of Rule" the royal characters are often seen wearing formal dress, with female royals wearing elaborate gowns and male royals wearing either military dress or formalwear. The commoners of the kingdom are depicted as wearing clothes suitable for their occupation, which is often plain and utilitarian, lacking the color and complexity of that of the royals. This imagery presents a visual representation of the distinction between the ruling class and those that are ruled and serves as an indication of the stratified nature of the population of Avalor that is consistent in the other

episodes analyzed. Those that rule have the wealth to dress in a way that indicates their authority, which is often in a manner reminiscent of Victorian England royalty instead of the Latin culture the show is expected to depict.

Images representing the authority of the royals are seen throughout each episode, with paintings, tapestries, and flags all bearing symbols of the authority of the royal family, including images of the crowned king and queen, the royal symbol, the royal scepter, and the king on horseback towering above others. Most of the paintings and tapestries depicting royalty are located inside the castle, but the other symbols representing the authority of the king or queen are placed throughout Avalor on streets, town squares, and buildings. Flags bearing the royal coat of arms are seen frequently in each episode, indicating royal authority over the working class.

Imagery of authoritarian relationships in *Sophia the First* are very similar to those seen in *Elena of Avalor*. The setting of *Sofia the First* is similar to *Elena of Avalor* in that they both take place in a fantasy kingdom and focus on the activities of young royals. But Sofia, being much younger than Elena and the youngest child in the royal family, is less likely to be in a position of authority. Having an older brother and sister, she is also not next in line to become ruler, nor is her personality one that would indicate a preference for rulership. Generally, she is depicted as a compassionate, honest, playful, pragmatic, and sincere child, who loves to help others. Despite these differences, the series creates opportunities for Sophia to demonstrate authority and leadership over others.

In an indication of social status, royal characters dress in colorful, detailed garments, while commoners wear clothes with less color and simpler design. In the episodes analyzed during this research, *Sofia the First* depicted a significant number of military officers, compared to *Elena of Avalor*. These officers were depicted as wearing uniforms indicating their role as

soldiers. While they carried no weapons, their costumes set them apart from other characters, bearing military like decorations and symbols of the kingdom. Royal children, including Sophia, generally wore smaller-sized versions of royal garments that their parents could be seen wearing. In keeping with his role as commander of the Royal Army, the King wore a military-like uniform of a different color than his soldiers. Other authoritarian imagery included numerous paintings of royal historical figures scattered throughout the castle. These paintings depicted what appeared to be past kings or members of the royal family clad in elaborate garments.

The PBS program *Arthur* presents differences in presentation of authoritarian relationships between characters. This series offers more limited opportunities to explore these kind of relationships due to the nature of the stories. Both *Elena of Avalor* and *Sophia the First* are set in a fantasy kingdom, where the main characters are princesses and the supporting characters also being royalty. Most of the characters with dialogue in *Arthur* are elementary school children, with frequent appearances by parents or teachers.

Depictions of authoritarian relationships in *Arthur* are often between teachers and students. Teachers may be seen wearing a wide variety of clothing, including dress pants, shirt and tie, dresses, and casual wear. Teacher dress is usually more formal than their students when at school, but when the program presents teachers outside of school, they are often seen in more casual clothing. Teachers' more formal dress at school signifies a separation from students and is likely intended to express authority over students by conveying certain values associated with professionalism, including compliance with authority figures, trust in authority figures, and belief in the expertise of authority figures.

An exception in the data was noted in the episode called "The Princess Problem." In this episode a substitute basketball coach name Lydia filled in for their regular coach. Lydia's dress

was casual throughout the episode, usually wearing clothing similar to those of her students. She was also depicted as using a wheelchair, which is not commonly associated with imagery intended to express authoritarian relationships. Other than a brief introduction at the beginning of the episode where she is depicted as instructing her students about basketball, she does not demonstrate an authoritarian role at any other point in the episode. This is somewhat at odds with the premise of the episode, which is about representation of leaders in media. In the episode, Lydia is troubled by a lack of representation of princesses that “look like her” in books and television programs that her students are watching. On discovering a historical princess with a disability, she encourages the other students to reconsider their traditional notions about what a princess should look like.

Another exception in the *Arthur* data took place in the episode called “Arthur’s Big Meltdown.” The scene was in a gaming room of Mary Alice’s mansion, with many of characters in the show visiting. Her family’s butler Bailey is pictured in the background making kale tea for the children dressed in a suit and tie. While this type of uniform usually indicates authority, Bailey’s role as a servant for the rich family carries little to no authority at all. Bailey is commonly seen wearing his suit and tie when taking orders from Mary Alice and her family. Bailey likely has little choice in his manner of his dress while at work and wears the suit and tie as a requirement for his job, not as a symbol for his authority over others. And the suit may be seen as an indication of his subservient role, because it is a requirement for his job.

Imagery of authoritarian relationships in *Curious George* are similar to those found in *Arthur*. In this series, the dress of people in authority positions usually takes the form of a uniform, as in the case of police or park rangers, or takes the form business attire, similar to what managers or teachers would wear. These forms of dress indicate the person is in a position of

authority over others, as is the case for 100% of the scenes with uniformed individuals or individuals wearing a suit and tie. In every case, those in authority positions are obeyed.

Due to the nature of *Doc McStuffins*, authoritarian imagery is less common than the other series. In the episodes analyzed in this research, two types of authoritarian imagery stood out. Being a series that is intended to promote the achievement of underrepresented groups, this program focuses on medical professionals, which are commonly depicted as wearing white coats and stethoscopes. This imagery symbolizes expertise in the medical field and authority in health related matters. *Doc McStuffins* is seen wearing a white coat for some length of time in every episode, as well as other members of her family, who are also medical doctors. The second type of authoritarian imagery seen in the series comes in the form of a police officer toy car. When this toy makes an appearance in the show, it makes numerous references to the law and requires other toys to follow certain rules. The vehicle is designed to appear as a police car from the 1980s, and it speaks in an authoritative male voice that seems a bit louder in volume than the voice of the other toys.

Authoritarianism as Part of the Natural Order

As described above, this theme indicates the normalization of authoritarianism and authoritarian relationships. In all episodes the concept of hierarchy is always assumed to be a part of the paradigm, except two episodes of *Curious George* where the plot did not include examples of this theme. When depicted, these relationships were always portrayed as normal. With one exception described below, this analysis indicates obedience by “good” characters to authority figures, but also that authoritarian relationships are not questioned. Usually only “bad” characters rebel against authority, but even these characters are not anarchists. They fully support authoritarianism. They just believe that they are the ones that should be in charge. The following

examples illustrate the authoritarian natural order present in these cartoons. The first is from *Sophia the First*.

Authoritarian relationships in *Sofia the First* are found in each of the episodes included in this data analysis, with some relationships akin to slavery. But regardless of the flavor of authoritarian relationship, the individual without autonomy is never portrayed as being discontent with the relationship. They cheerfully go about their duties, following the commands of others, usually being depicted without dreams or hopes of their own, in contrast to those in authority positions, who often ponder their future, narrate their dreams, and reveal their heartfelt desires. Other than the Sofia's family's head butler, Baileywick, servants have little dialogue at all except in carrying out their duties.

For example, in the episode titled "Minding the Manor," Sophia visits her aunt's magical mansion, where she is placed in charge of getting the grounds ready for a party her aunt is having that afternoon. Sofia is placed in a leadership role, having authority over her aunt's butler, Spruce. Spruce is a hobgoblin, and is depicted as being short, bald, and fastidious. Sophia initially doubts her ability to lead the preparations of the mansion saying, "I've never been left in charge of anything Aunt Tilly. What if something goes wrong?" Her aunt responds, "Then I'm sure you'll make it go right" and begins to sing a song to motivate Sofia that includes the lyrics, "It's all a part of growing up. You start a tiny little pup, but soon enough you're gettin' large, and now it's time to be in charge." And "It's up to you to be the one who makes sure everything gets done. Because being in charge is not so tough, if you're confident enough." The lyrics express an ideology shared with other Disney cartoons, including *Elena of Avalor* that represents the idea that authority over others is right and natural for certain individuals, as well as the idea that leaders are actually the individuals who do the work, thus justifying their position as leaders.

After Sofia's aunt leaves, Sofia and the servant Spruce begin the preparations for the party, following a list that the aunt left for Sofia. In the process, Sofia accidentally uses a music box to animate stone gargoyles that are set around the main entrance to the manor. The animated gargoyles are depicted as living, sentient beings who understand the world in which they live. But they are also of flawed character and are depicted as criminal buffoons, who attempt to take over the mansion. They are eventually subdued by Sophia and turned back to stone. Sofia's aunt returns at the end of the battle and confesses that the entire ordeal has been a test of Sofia's leadership. Sofia's aunt then reanimates the gargoyles so that she can order them to return to their places outside the manor and says that she will allow them to attend the party "before we turn you back to stone," on the condition that they "behave." The gargoyle leader responds "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Anything you say Ms. Tilly," indicating his understanding of her power over them. This scene demonstrates the absolute authority that Sofia's aunt has over the gargoyles. The episode implies that the gargoyles may have also been playing a role when they "attacked" the mansion, in that they were "in on" the test that Sofia's aunt was using on Sofia. The behavior of the gargoyles clearly indicates that they would prefer to remain animated, living creatures, and that they understand the power that Sofia's aunt has over them. Sofia's aunt indicates no empathy for the gargoyles. They are tools to be used for her own ends. Although Sofia's aunt is intended to be a "good" and virtuous character, allowing the gargoyles to remain living creatures was never even considered. In effectively killing the creatures, until they are needed again, Sofia's aunt exercises a kind of authority so completely over other beings that is rarely seen in even the darkest of Disney villains. Even Sofia herself seemingly has no qualms about the situation or her aunt's actions. Perhaps the butler's speed and efficiency in cleaning the mansion can be explained by his witness of events like this.

The second two examples of authoritarian natural order come from *Curious George*. Scenes with authoritarian interactions between individuals occurred less frequently in *Curious George* than in *Arthur*, likely due to the absence of a school setting. The data indicate authoritarian interactions in 60% of the episodes of *Curious George* that were analyzed. Notable interactions include a scene with a park ranger in the episode “George of the Desert”. In this episode, George, the Man in the Yellow Hat and his scientist friend travel to a nearby national park in order to view a meteor shower from a scenic location. As they approach the park entrance, the park ranger posted at the checkpoint approaches the vehicle. She is dressed in an army green uniform with hat, badge, and combat boots. Her demeanor is friendly as she greets the group. The Man in the Yellow Hat explains the reason for their visit to the park ranger, and George indicates that he is there looking for animals. The park ranger smiles and gives them a clipboard with papers for them to sign, ordering the Man in the Yellow Hat to “sign here.” The Man in the Yellow Hat signs the papers without comment and without reading them. He then returns the papers to the park ranger, who accepts them. She advises them to dress appropriately and drink enough water. They then pass into the park. The authoritarian relationship between the park ranger and the Man in the Yellow Hat is indicated by her dress, the spatial orientation of each, with the park ranger standing above the Man in the Yellow Hat, who is seated, the directives that she issues, and the checkpoint like nature of the park entrance. The Man in the Yellow Hat signed the documents without question and without reading them, indicating the trust placed in individuals presented as authority figures. He followed her orders because she was an authority figure who he trusted enough to believe that signing the papers was the right thing to do.

A second notable instance of natural authoritarian relationships took place in the episode called “George Saves a Tree.” In this episode, George is concerned about an apple tree that has been in his neighborhood for a long time. The tree is being moved to a new location in order to make room for new hotel being built by entrepreneur Mr. Glass, who is depicted as being dressed in a suit and tie. George understands that the apple tree is about to be moved and finds the tree movers in a nearby lot moving a different tree, where he hopes to learn about the tree moving process. The tree mover allows George to observe their work and the pecan tree is dug up and carried on the machine to its new location with George along for the ride. They happen to pass the location where Mr. Glass is pondering how he can make his hotel the most profitable. In a moment of inspiration, Mr. Glass yells at the driver as he and George pass, “That’s it! Hold that tree!”

The tree mover stops his vehicle and asks, “Mr. Glass, what are you doing here?”

Mr. Glass responds, “Having an inspiration! I finally know what my new hotel needs. More trees!” The tree mover then gives the pecan tree to Mr. Glass, and it is planted next to the apple tree.

The scene then changes to a ribbon cutting ceremony with Mr. Glass holding giant golden scissors in front of his new hotel with the two trees in front. His arms spread wide as the crowd cheers. Speaking to the crowd he exclaims, “Thank you! Thank you! I’d like to welcome everyone to the grand opening of the one and only apple and pecan tree hotel!” Mr. Glass then cuts the ribbon to the cheers of the crowd, holding up his arms to his new hotel. The crowd gathers around Mr. Glass congratulating him, with the Man in the Yellow Hat coming up to embrace his arm with both hands in a warm handshake as he noticeably bows to Mr. Glass

during the handshake. Mr. Glass seems distracted and does not look at the Man in the Yellow Hat during the interaction.

The authoritarian nature of Mr. Glass's interactions with others in this scene can be seen in his expectation that the pecan tree will be given to him by the tree movers, even though the tree was not his. The obedience of the tree mover in giving him the tree with no questions asked reinforces the authoritarian nature of the interaction. The nature of the reaction of the crowd and the Man in the Yellow Hat also supports the authoritarianism inherent to their relationships, particularly by the demeanor of Mr. Glass and his aloofness when interacting with other characters who were congratulating him. It seemed perfectly normal to everyone that Mr. Glass could order a stranger to give him a tree for his hotel and be obeyed. A well-known and well-dressed business leader needed a tree so his hotel would be more profitable, so it seems normal that he should be able to have one that he likes, even if it belongs to someone else.

Another example of depictions of natural authoritarian relationships takes place in the episode "Muffy's House Guests". Bailey, clad in a mechanic's uniform, is seen underneath the family's limousine working on the vehicle, wrench in hand. Mary Alice runs up to him, interrupting his work on the car, exclaiming, "Bailey!"

Bailey responds, "Yes, Ms. Muffy" to the child, as he rolls out from underneath the car.

Mary Alice asks Bailey, "Do you see that nest?", indicating a falcon nest resting on the balcony outside her bedroom window. Bailey indicates that he is aware of the nest, to which Mary Alice responds, "Get rid of them! Put them someplace better Bailey, like a tree." Throughout the exchange, Bailey indicates no irritation at being disturbed from his work on the car and attempts to placate Mary Alice by discussing the birds' migrant nature and how they will likely leave in the near future.

When Mary Alice's father, Ed, drives up in a red sports car with flames painted on the sides, she runs up to him expressing her disgust with having a falcon nest outside her bedroom window, asking him to get rid of it. Without looking at Bailey or acknowledging him, Ed walks past Bailey and orders, "Bailey, you'll find nets in the garage."

Bailey attempts to reason with Ed, but Ed ignores him and walks into the house. Mary Alice is informed by her friend that disturbing the nest would be illegal, so she come up with another plan for Bailey to put into action. Despite his own reservations, Bailey assists. The plan fails and Mary Alice ends up falling into a bed of roses, with Bailey dutifully rushing over to help her up asking, "Ms. Muffy, are you all right?" Bailey then serves as caretaker for the disheveled Mary Alice, providing cold compress for her head and serving her hot tea as she reclines on a sofa.

Throughout the episode Bailey accepts the orders and directives given to him by the family he is employed by even when he believes their actions are illogical or destined to fail. He presents little or no resistance to any of the directives given to him. For Bailey, compliance is expected, even when he is given terse commands that would be considered disrespectful outside an authoritarian relationship.

Authoritarianism is Good for Us

As described above, this theme describes portrayals of authoritarian relationships as good for society. Every episode of each series portrays authoritarianism as beneficial, except two episodes of *Curious George* where this theme was not a part of the plot. This is expressed through character dialogue explicitly, interactions between characters that portray these relationships in a positive way, or as a part of the function of a working society in the cartoon.

The following examples describe how Elena's version of rulership is good for others and how Mr. Glass's role as business leader in the community is seen as beneficial to other citizens.

Elena's personality traits give an indication about her attitude toward ruling over others. Initially in the series, Elena felt great disappointment that she would not be able to immediately assume the throne. This disappointment caused her to resent the fact that her family felt that she needed more life experience before becoming queen. In the premier episode, she often commented that she was "ready to rule now." Through the events of this episode, she comes to realize that she does not have the experience necessary to be queen, and she accepts her role as crown princess, who rules with a group of advisors who have the power to overrule her decisions. At the conclusion of this episode, she selects her grandparents, her cousin Esteban, and her friend Naomi, daughter of Harbourmaster Captain Turner, to serve as her Grand Council.

These actions and events indicate the nature of Elena's disposition toward rulership over others. Although in other episodes, Elena asserts that her desire to rule is rooted in the care and concern she has for the citizens of Avalor, her words demonstrate her preference to be in authority over other people, believing that she will make the lives of her people better.

Elena's selection of the members of her Grand Council is interesting. There are many reasons she might have chosen her friends and family members to this position, including nepotism and decreased resistance to her decision making. But it is also possible that she just feels more comfortable with people she knows because she is new to being queen. In any case, the message expressed by her selections does seem to be one that normalizes nepotism.

Another example of the benefits of authoritarianism can be found in the episode "To Queen or not to Queen." In this episode, Elena questions if being queen is the right role for her, wondering if she might be more suited to some other profession. Elena's magical fox overhears

her talk to herself and places her into a magical slumber where she dreams about an alternate reality in which she is no longer a princess and is unknown to everyone in the kingdom. In this alternate reality, Elena's cousin and royal chancellor, Esteban, is king. Over the course of the dream, Elena is re-introduced to each of her friends and associates, who do not recognize her. Through their conversations, she comes to realize that they each live unhappy lives because Esteban only allows his subjects to work in professions of his choosing, for his own benefit. Gabe, former captain of the guard, now is owner of a bakery where he is only allowed to make one kind of cake, one that is the favorite of Esteban. Armando, a former servant at the castle, now can only work at his parent's dairy farm because the king loves cheese and needs him to deliver it. Mateo, former wizard in training at the castle, is now the court jester because the king thinks he is funny.

Elena rebels against the king's authoritarianism, leading a group of her friends and companions to the castle, where they force their way inside and confront the king. She exclaims, "It's time to tell King Esteban, enough is enough! He can't tell other people how to live their lives!" She sings a song about freedom with lyrics like, "Should you suffer and play the jester, or the town baker if you want more? Follow your dreams, sail the ocean, if that's what your heart is yearning for . . ." and, " . . . It's up to you to rule your life! Your destiny belongs to you! No king can tell you what to do!" Elena deposes the king before waking up, asserting, "I demand what's best for my people, and that's for me to be their queen!"

In this episode, authority over others is considered just and righteous when individuals may choose where they work and is considered unjust when it places limits on employment options. And the desire to rule over others itself is never framed as a negative personality trait unless that desire is tainted by selfishness. In other words, it is ok to be queen, as long as you are

a nice queen. The episode suggests that people benefit from having someone kind and benevolent looking out for their best interests.

Scenes with notable authoritarian content were observed in each episode of *Arthur*. Typically, these scenes consisted teacher-student interactions with Mr. Ratburn or some other teacher issuing orders to students. This kind of student-teacher interaction is not detailed here other than in quantity, with teachers ordering students to perform some action in 75% of the episodes observed and a total of 17 instances, some of these taking place in the same scene. More notable examples of authoritarian relationships are detailed below.

In the episode “Arthur’s Big Meltdown”, Arthur becomes enraged another child spilled a green colored drink on his new shoes. The incident took place at Mary’s Alice’s mansion.

Arthur is so angry that he verbally berates his friends and accidentally breaks some of the items in Mary’s Alice’s game room as he storms out the door. Later in the episode, Mary Alice invites him over to prove to him that he broke the items. She says, “Now just relax Arthur. I’m going to download the footage from my security camera to my laptop.” The children then watch the screen as Arthur is seen breaking the items on the way out of the room. The children discuss Arthur’s behavior, and he agrees that his behavior was inappropriate. The authoritarian relationship in this scene is related to the surveillance system installed in Mary Alice’s game room. None of the children seemed offended or even surprised that their actions and speech were being recorded inside Mary Alice’s home. Their unspoken acceptance of being spied on inside a private home without their consent or knowledge represents a submission to authority and describes an authoritarian relationship between Mary Alice and her friends.

The benefits of authoritarianism can also be seen in the *Doc McStuffins* episode “Wrong Side of the Law”. In this episode, Doc and several of her toys are building a tower, when a toy

police car named Officer Pete informs them that the height of the tower could pose a danger to the other toys and is a violation of the law. Doc's toy dragon is skeptical that the tower poses a danger, but proceeds to bump into it, causing it to fall on himself, proving Officer Pete's point. After accepting the dragon's acknowledgement that he is right, Officer Pete says, "That's my job, to uphold the law and keep everyone safe." Toy dragon tells Officer Pete that he wants to help him "uphold the law", and Officer Pete agrees to let him be a police officer as well because the dragon has hands and can write tickets. The pair of police officers proceed to patrol the outdoor playground issuing tickets to many toys found to be in violation of the law. Without warning Officer Pete suddenly begins speeding and driving erratically, crashing into several structures. Toy dragon reluctantly gives Officer Pete a ticket, places him under arrest, and Doc takes him into the clinic, suspecting that something is wrong with him. Doc discovers that Officer Pete has a broken windshield that is causing his erratic behavior. She replaces it, and Officer Pete continues his duties upholding the law.

This episode gives the clear message that authoritarianism is good for us. Officer Pete's commentary makes it clear that he is issuing tickets because he believes that following the law makes the backyard a safer place. Doc and the other toys seem to agree with him, and even the toys that Officer Pete gives tickets to understand that their wrongdoing makes the backyard less safe. But who made the rules that the other toys are expected to follow? It is not clear from the episode where the rules are coming from. The toys were not seen discussing the creation of any rules. The rules seem to come from Officer Pete, an unelected official who is exercising authority over others. His right to police the other toys seemed to come from Doc McStuffins because she expressed her appreciation for his actions.

It is also interesting to note the different treatment that Officer Pete received compared to the other toys who were breaking the law. Doc was convinced that something was wrong with Officer Pete for him to be breaking the law. No such consideration was given to the other toys who were breaking the law. The message here seems to be that authority figures who break the law must have issues that are causing their behavior, while common citizens must be deciding to break the law.

Authoritarianism is a common theme in the children's cartoons observed in this analysis. Imagery in the form of dress, artwork, and symbols establish a clear differentiation between those with power and those without. *Elena of Avalor* and *Sofia the First* were the strongest examples of this imagery, with royalty and class division commonly depicted in every episode. Authoritarian imagery also sets the background for the other themes of authoritarianism as natural and beneficial. All series depict a natural authoritarianism, either in the form of divine right, class, or law, and they also depict authoritarianism as good in that it establishes order and safety for society.

Consumerism

As described above, consumerism represents a desire for material possessions or things. Although consumerism is less represented in the data from the 25 episodes in the data set than the other categories, there are a number of examples of characters desiring material possessions, or in the case of the following example desiring material possessions that could make them rich. The overarching theme of this episode relates to a desire for riches, with the pathway to those riches being investments in collectable toys.

One of the clearest examples of consumerism is the episode of *Arthur*, entitled "Toy Trouble." The episode starts with DW, Arthur's sister, dreaming about using the power of wealth

to create a robot army, which she uses to attack Arthur. The rest of the episode centers around the potential value of collectible toys. Arthur's grandmother gives him a toy that seems, on the surface, to be damaged or imperfect-so he gives it to his younger sister. Arthur's friend Buster suggests that the defect might actually make the toy valuable, which piques the interest of their third (and richest) friend, Muffy. Together, they visit a toy store to learn about collectibles, all the while desiring the material worth of "valuable" toys, with Muffy making comments like "How's that valuable? I thought you were talking about jewels or cars", and Buster responding, "It could be worth a lot more than those things" while Arthur and Muffy respond simultaneously with great interest, "Seriously?"

At the toy store they learn about the value of some unique collectibles, like an early Superman comic worth over 2 million, which piques their interest even more. The desire for wealth is so great, Arthur is willing to lie to his little sister to get the toy back, saying "It's bad, It's really bad. Who'd want it?" In asserting that the toy is poor quality, hardly worth 5 dollars, Arthur employs deception to satisfy his desire for material goods he believes are valuable. on hearing the potential value of the item, D.W. also has a much greater desire to keep the toy (notably, there is no time when the siblings consider collaborating so that both will benefit from the potential value of the toy. The episode includes a bike vs. limousine race to a second toy store to buy a second hopefully valuable toy—with Muffy trying to use a credit card and the boys pooling their money —only to find out that neither toy is valuable and that they have lost money by trying to get rich quick. Although Buster and Arthur lose their investment, their desire for valuable toys seems to be coupled with a nihilistic desire that would rather see none of their peers be enriched if they also cannot be—they all agree that if they cannot be rich, it is good DW cannot either. For each of them wealth means something slightly different—for DW, it is an

opportunity to trade value for ponies. Arthur and Buster want to best their peers, and for Muffy, the opportunity to add to her collection of already expensive things. The episode presents the children as all believing in and participating in consumerism as a natural and worthy endeavor and does not challenge the assumption that it is OK to trick your friends and family if you stand to gain financially. There are no negative consequences for lying for any character.

In a smaller but similar vein, in the *Arthur* episode “Francine’s Cleats of Strength”, the episode opens with Francine breaking her cleats during a soccer game. Later seeing an ad in a magazine for “the world’s most advanced soccer cleats”, she excitedly asks her father to purchase them for her. Her father surprises her with a different pair of cleats that he just bought for her, but she is disappointed that they are not the ones she saw in the magazine. Although her father cannot afford the \$100 price tag of the cleats she wants, he tells her that if she can pay for half, then he will pay the remaining \$50 for them. While she tries to get her part of the money, she expresses her desire for the cleats to her classmates, telling them how advanced and amazing they are. Francine’s desire for the cleats is eventually fulfilled through yard work that she does for one of the school’s lunch ladies.

Although the two examples above give an indication that consumerism is an element in children’s cartoons, it was less common for characters to voice desires for specific material possessions in other episodes. Buying and selling of goods and scenes of economic transactions are more common, but this is related more to entrepreneurship, so these examples are not included here. To be categorized as consumerism, an expression of desire for some item is necessary.

Entrepreneurship

As described in chapter 3, entrepreneurship represents the selling of goods and services for financial gain. This category includes physical shops that sell material goods, transactional interactions between characters that includes the exchange of money for something of value, or actions taken by characters with the goal of making profit. I analyzed the 25 episodes for examples of entrepreneurship and for messages about the value of work and/or attitudes toward transactional interactions and found two themes related to the nature of entrepreneurship and how is it perceived to be of benefit to society.

Entrepreneurship as Part of the Natural Order

Entrepreneurship is very common in *Curious George*, with 4 out of the 5 episodes having some economic activity in the background, making it a natural part of the world. In the *Curious George* episode “Orange Crush”, the man in the yellow hat receives a large number of oranges from his cousin, who owns an orange orchard. George is excited to have so many oranges to eat, but his friend Marco informs him that there is a group of construction workers working on the road nearby. Marco believes that there would be an opportunity to use the oranges that they got for free to make a profit. Because the day is so hot, he tells George that they should sell orange juice to the thirsty construction workers. The possibility of donating orange juice to the workers is not considered or discussed, even though the workers are working on a section of the road that George and his family needs.

The juice stand is a great success with the workers buying many glasses from George and Marco. With their hands getting tired from squeezing so many oranges, the young entrepreneurs seek a more efficient way of producing juice from the oranges. After a comical scene where George attempts to drive the worker’s steamroller over the oranges, they construct a rolling

device with a barrel to squeeze the juice from the oranges. This enables them to quickly extract the juice from many oranges at a time. Their invention produces enough orange juice to sell to all of the workers. George's ingenuity is shown to be very useful in increasing profits for their business. The overall presentation of entrepreneurship in the episode is one of a natural system where money can be made if individuals can recognize and capitalize on the needs or desires of others, and an increase in profit can be produced when more efficient means for generating profit can be created.

As described above in the *Arthur* episode "Francine's Cleats of Strength", Francine becomes an entrepreneur in order to make enough money to purchase a pair of new cleats. Francine initially takes a job working for Muffy but does not feel that she is actually doing work deserving of payment, so Muffy hires her as her butler. She is unable to complete the difficult duties of her butler, so Muffy fires her but offers to buy the cleats she wanted. Francine refuses the gift and works for one of her school's lunch ladies, helping her with yardwork until she has saved up the \$50. The episode describes Francine's entrepreneurship as a natural way for her to achieve her desire for special, new cleats. While entrepreneurship is a thematic element of this episode, other themes related to appropriate behavior will be explored in the next section.

Entrepreneurship is Good for Us

In the *Curious George* episode "Monkey Market", George is introduced by his farmer friends to the entrepreneurship of a farmer's market. The episode opens with George and the man in the yellow hat playing a pretend game of farmer's market with George pretending to sell vegetables. George then travels to the farmer's house to assist with the preparations for the market. Early the next morning they all travel to the city to sell their vegetables. On arrival, George assists with setting up the vegetable stand and hopes to help sell the vegetables, but the

farmer's daughter wants George to take her to see the city. The pair leaves the farmer's market to explore, but the farmer's stowaway goat runs from the market, leading them on a chase across the city. George and his friend follow the goat to Mr. Glass's skyscraper, where they meet Mr. Glass and one of his employees. After a short interaction with Mr. Glass, who directs them to the goat, they continue the chase. After a roundabout adventure through the city following the trail of destruction left by the goat, they find him back at the farmer's market. On returning, George continues his work selling vegetables at the now very busy market. The market is depicted visually and through dialogue as a happy place where individuals are engaging in commerce that benefits them as an individual or is beneficial to their own business. Smiling customers engaged in positive banter with each other, with the farmers, or with George presents entrepreneurship in a positive light that is beneficial for society.

As described above, in the *Elena of Avalor* episode "To Queen or Not to Queen", Elena is placed into a magical slumber when she doubts whether or not she should be queen. During this slumber, she enters an alternate reality where a corrupt king only allows his subjects to pursue careers in jobs that are beneficial to him. In numerous scenes in the episode, shops and business are shown, including a bakery where her former captain of the guard now works as a baker for his father, her friend Naomi is shown selling fish, and her friend Armando pushing a cart of cheese that was produced in his parent's cheese business. Although none of these individuals enjoy their jobs, they are all depicted as a necessary part of the city's commerce. While the commerce of this episode is for the benefit of the corrupt king, the narrative of the story implies that happiness lies for each of us in pursuing our own occupational goals. If it were not for the corrupt king limiting the freedom of each individual to pursue their own dreams, the kingdom

would be a much happier and prosperous place, implying that entrepreneurship in pursuit of our goals is good for society.

The examples discussed above of entrepreneurship in these children's cartoons were chosen because the entrepreneurship is a part of the episode's plot. Entrepreneurship in the background, separate from the plot is very common in all series except *Doc McStuffins*. Arthur and his friends frequently go to a local restaurant to buy milkshakes and visit other stores to make purchases. Sofia and Elena are often seen in their kingdom's town where shops with customers are buying and selling. George has many friends that are business owners and is often seen in these stores during some part of each episode. Some form of entrepreneurship is shown in 68% of all episodes.

Lessons about Right and Wrong

As described in chapter 3, lessons about right and wrong include teachings about the violation of laws, social norms, or other acceptable behaviors. The lessons that characters take away may include some kind of punishment or realization that the action is unacceptable. I analyzed the 25 episodes for lessons about right and wrong.

Workplace Values

Workplace values are considered to be beliefs or dispositions that one should hold toward work. These values include work ethic, efficiency, productivity, or some other belief that contributes to increased labor value. This theme relays a message about the value of hard work or the negative impact that laziness can have on your life, while efficiency represents productivity or how well a worker can do their job so that more tasks may be completed. The following is an example from *Arthur*.

In the *Arthur* episode “Francine’s Cleats of Strength” described above, Francine faces choices that place her in a moral dilemma. Initially, she allows herself to be convinced by Muffy that working for the lunch lady will be difficult work. Muffy tells her, “Francine you don’t want to do that job. Think of the blisters that you’ll get!... Friends don’t let friends do manual labor.” In an attempt to avoid difficult physical labor, she accepts Muffy’s offer to be her personal assistant, even though neither of them have any idea what the job involves. Muffy decides that having a personal assistant means talking, playing games, and eating snacks with a friend and will give Francine \$10 each day. After a few days of working as personal assistant to Muffy, Francine decides that she should be doing actual work for the money she is receiving. Implying that money should not be taken from others unless you do real work for them. Muffy then employs her as her butler, sending Bailey on vacation, but Francine cannot do the job effectively, so Muffy fires her but buys the pair of cleats for her as a gift. Francine refuses the gift because she does not feel that she has earned the cleats. Implying that charity should not be accepted if you have other options for work. Earlier in the episode we learn that Francine’s father is working extra shifts as a sanitation employee in order to afford his part of the new cleats. Francine’s decision not to accept the cleats is interesting because it also affects her father, because he is paying for half of the price. She could have accepted the gift and relieved her father of the extra work that he has taken on. Ultimately, Francine goes to work for the lunch lady and is paid enough to purchase her part of the cleats. She even decides to do extra work for her in order to buy her friends ice cream. The messages in this episode relate to work ethic and charity. The episode implies that money should only be earned through acceptable forms of work and that charity should not be taken if you have other options of acceptable work, even if that work is difficult.

While explicit discussions of the value of hard work were mostly commonly seen in *Arthur*, characters in other series are almost always seen as being busy and active. Butlers and castle workers, in particular, are always depicted as being busy with the work of their jobs, while Sofia, Elena, Doc, and George are busy in different ways, usually involving rescuing, discovering, or exploring. For example, in the 5 episodes of *Sofia the First* the total time Sofia spend in various activities is as follows: recreation/relaxation 5 min., 7 min. 30 sec. relaxed conversation, 15 min. talking about plot issues before the action, 67 min. 30 sec. action to resolve plot through dialogue, exploration, or physical/mental activity.

Another workplace value that finds expression in these cartoons is one of efficiency. In the background in other *Doc McStuffins* episodes through the actions of the characters, the following episode expresses explicit dialogue referencing the theme. In the *Doc McStuffins* episode “Doc’s Busy Day”, Doc’s toddler aged cousin Sabrina comes for a visit. Sabrina loves to play with Doc’s toys but is at an age where she is not very careful when playing with them, resulting in many of Doc’s toys being damaged. Doc brings the damaged toys to her clinic, but quickly becomes overwhelmed as they all begin asking her for help with some ailment or other. The scene becomes chaotic as the toys all crowd around her, each demanding attention for their individual problems. Seeing Doc’s distress at the crowd, Hallie approaches to offer support to Doc, offering the advice to “Stop looking at the big picture. Take it just one little toy at a time.” Hallie continues, “One thing I’ve learned from all these years of chart making is this: Be organized”. Doc understands and suggests setting up a triage station for the toys so that they can be organized by severity of injury. Using a color system with red, yellow, and green cards, they rank severity of cases and being working on repairing each one starting with the most serious.

Hallie sings as they work a song about organization with lyrics that include, “One spot, one thought, one job, one toy at a time.” Soon, every toy is repaired.

This episode relates the importance of organization to efficiency. With the goal of repairing all of her toys in a reasonable amount of time, Doc is encouraged to become organized. She devises a system to manage all of her tasks by ranking them in order of importance. The ability to organize tasks in an efficient way in the workplace is valued by employers so that employees make efficient use of their time.

In the *Elena of Avalor* episode, “All Kingdoms Fair”, the rewards of hard work are expressed in a brief exchange between Elena and her friend and castle worker Armando. Elena and her friend and council member, Naomi are depicted seated on the castle grounds planning a return of a fair to the kingdom that would attract “merchants, artists, and musicians from all over the realm.” Armando rushes toward them hurtling over and around workers preparing the fairgrounds. He arrives out of breath and presents Elena with her welcome speech and an order form for more flowers that she needs to sign. He also carries a basket of pastries for Elena and Naomi to help “get them through the afternoon”. As Armando tells Elena that he will need to get confetti for the opening ceremonies, she asks him if he ever takes a break, to which he responds, “I don’t rest until you do princess.” Elena tells him that she is very proud of him and that he has become an excellent Chief of the Castle. During this exchange, Elena’s cousin walks by and remarks sarcastically, “and it only took you two years.”

This episode is a presentation of the value of hard work and the social mobility it brings. In developing this narrative, Armando is put in charge of the fair, where his mother and brother have set up a booth selling cheese. Armando’s brother, who frequently insults him as being incompetent, ridicules him throughout the episode until Armando proves to him how capable he

is through a series of successful decisions that result in both the success of the fair and great sales for his family's cheese business. After seeing Armando as a success, his brother apologizes to him for a lifetime of ridicule.

"All Kingdoms Fair" is particularly interesting because it combines themes of entrepreneurship and lessons about hard work in a lesson about acceptance and social mobility. It can be assumed from the dialogue that had Armando not demonstrated such hard work and competence that he would not have achieved either a ranking of Chief of the Castle or the appreciation and respect of his brother. The implications seem to be that kindness is earned, even from family members.

"Norberg Peace Prize" is another *Elena of Avalor* episode that focuses on workplace values. In this case, the theme reflects the need for cooperation to accomplish tasks, even between enemies. This episode is a continuation of a previous episode where two dislikable royal figures from different kingdoms are introduced, King Hector and Queen Abigail. These characters are depicted as bickering peers who insult and demean each other when they are together. Each being a ruler of their own kingdom, they have stereotypically entitled personalities and are generally presented as unlikeable, particularly King Hector, who suffers from a cartoonishly large ego. The episode presents a situation where due to damage to his ship by Queen Abigail, King Hector refuses to give Abigail special berries her kingdom needs for an upcoming celebration. He asserts that until he gets a new ship, he will not give the berries. The episode progresses by Elena trying different methods in order for them to become friends so that each of them would be willing to provide the other with what they want. She finally realizes that they do not need to be friends in order to cooperate, so she takes them to a deserted island so they can build a raft together in order to escape the island. The two royals are finally able to

work together effectively when they both have the same goal. Ultimately this cooperation results in a truce between the two and they each agree to provide the other with what they want.

In the capitalist workplace, workers usually do not decide with whom they work. There are often individuals with vastly different worldviews and values working together, which makes conflicts between workers likely. These conflicts may reduce efficiency, productivity, and profit for the capitalist, so it is important to encourage workplace skills that would enable workers to set aside these differences. The themes of this episode promote those cooperation skills and the ability to work together despite differences. Even when workers dislike each other, they can still effectively comply with the directives of the owners.

Getting What You Want

While the examples above describe the value of hard work in getting what you want, the following episode of *Arthur* sends a different message. In order to get what he wants, Arthur is seen to be willing to lie and employ deceit. This mixed messaging in the series may be related to the fact that the people he is lying to are either his sister, who he sees as an annoying rival, or friends that have a flawed character. Hard work and honesty seem to be most valued when related to employment.

In the *Arthur* episode “Arthur’s Toy Trouble”, as described above, Arthur and his friends believe that there is a valuable toy, possibly worth a million dollars at the toy store. In the episode, Arthur and his friend Buster employ deceit on several occasions to trick their friends and family members in various ways in order to gain the toy for themselves. Specifically, Arthur misleads his sister about the value of the toy, pretending that the toy is worthless when he believes that it is very valuable. And Buster distracts Muffy from purchasing the toy so that Arthur can rush to grab the toy before she can put her hands on it. The messages in this episode

seem to imply that when the stakes are high, lying and deceit are acceptable ways of getting the things that you want. An interesting thing about his episode is that Muffy, a character often portrayed in a negative light as being materialistic, does not employ the kind of devious tactics demonstrated by Arthur and Buster to get the toy.

Power

For this research, power is defined as an imbalance in a relationship that comes from one party having greater wealth, status, strength, arms, technology, beauty, charisma, or other characteristic that gives benefit in the society or circumstance. This theme is most explicit in the data from *Sofia the First*, but other episodes from other series also contain situations or circumstances with relationship imbalances that would give one party an advantage over another. As Sofia's aunt demonstrated her power over the gargoyles in an example above, another episode of *Sofia the First* analyzed in this study teaches further lessons about power. While the following episode seems to be a lesson about sharing, the context of events makes it a lesson about the relationships of power between a small, impoverished group of gnomes and Sofia's wealthy and prosperous kingdom.

In the *Sofia the First* episode "The Crown of Blossoms", Sofia is chosen to be the Princess of Plenty for the yearly Festival of Plenty. To perform her duties as Princess of Plenty, she is required to wear the Crown of Blossoms during the festival and plant a magical seed from the crown, which will ensure a bountiful harvest for the kingdom. She is given the crown as she is planting a garden for her pet rabbit. Being impatient for his garden to grow, he asks that she give him a seed from the crown so that his garden will grow quickly and be more delicious. Sofia responds that the seeds are not hers to give, but as she leaves, several seeds fall off of the crown, unknown to her. The rabbit sees the seeds fall and quickly picks them up without Sofia seeing.

The rabbit and his squirrel friend debate about whether he should keep the seeds or return them to Sofia, which ends with the rabbit singing a song that includes the lyrics, “What’s right is plain to see. Can’t plant these seeds they’re not my property... the seeds just waste away in that blossom crown. Why don’t I move them right on down to garden town?” And echoing moral relativism he sings, “It could be what’s wrong for you is just the right wrong thing for me... they say the truth is in the eye of the beholder”. Deciding to do the right wrong thing, he plants the seeds, which immediately turn into a bountiful crop of large, delicious vegetables. Seeing the mound of delicious vegetables, a pair of birds asks the rabbit if he can share some with them, and when he refuses, the birds comment about how rude he is. A pair of gnomes also see his performance from behind a tree and step out while the rabbit and squirrel are eating the vegetables. The crown belongs to the gnomes, and they trick the rabbit to take them to where Sofia keeps it so they can get it back. They manage to get the crown and flee the castle. Sofia and the other eventually track down the gnomes and lure them into a trap, where they take the crown from the gnomes. The gnomes convince Sophia that the crown belongs to them and she agrees to return it, making an agreement with them that they would share the crown with her family one day each year for their Festival of Plenty. Sharing is a common theme throughout the episode, which is always promoted as the moral choice. Considering the relationships of class and power in the episode, the gnome community is poor and relatively powerless compared to Sofia’s kingdom. The gnomes live in a barren land and depend on the magic of the Crown of Blossoms to provide enough food for their people, while the Sofia’s kingdom has fertile land that has no trouble growing crops, and they only use the crown to provide excess food. When the agreement to share the crown is made, the king tells the gnomes that they will always have the friendship of Sofia’s kingdom. This seems to imply that the friendship is conditional on the gnomes sharing

the crown. With the great difference in power between the two peoples and the dependence the gnomes have on the crown for survival, it might have been difficult for the gnomes to refuse. No matter how poor or desperate an individual might be, they are still expected to share what they have with the rich. And the rich agree not to take what they want by force.

Value of Workers

This theme is unique in the data in that no other episodes reference the disposability of workers. In the *Doc McStuffins* episode “Demitri the Dazzling”, we are introduced to a charismatic magician named Demitri and his pet rabbit. While Doc and her stuffed animal friends are showing off her clinic to Demitri, his pet rabbit, who has developed an unseen issue with an exposed spring in his foot, destroys Demitri’s stage and magic equipment. On seeing the destruction Demitri sadly tells his rabbit that they can no longer work together. While Demitri interviews replacements for his rabbit, it quietly goes outside and hides. None of the possible replacement animals Demitri interviews is an appropriate replacement for the rabbit, and when they notice the rabbit is missing they all begin to search. Doc finds the rabbit outside the clinic and brings him inside. She then proceeds to teach Demitri a lesson about having pets, telling him that adopting a pet is a lifelong responsibility. She says that pets cannot be abandoned when they act in ways that we think they should not. Viewing the episode through a Marxist lens, the rabbit works for Demitri. And when Demitri decides that his worker is no longer suitable, it is abandoned. Doc’s intervention and message is based on the realization that the rabbit has a problem that can be fixed, not because pets (or workers) cannot be abandoned.

Honesty

While the messages in *Arthur's* "Toy Trouble" describe dishonesty as a means to an end, other episodes that have honesty as a theme always portray the virtue positively. For example, in the *Sofia the First* episode "A Tale of Two Teams", Sofia is conflicted about which team she will play for at the King's Cup dazzleball competition. The game is between the villagers and royalty. Having lived with the villagers before becoming royalty, Sofia feels loyalty to the villagers, and she has many friends on the villagers' team. She initially agrees to play on the villagers' team but following a high pressure sales pitch by her step-sister and step-brother, where they show her all of the benefits of being on the royal team, including the finest uniforms, training equipment, a sideline throne to rest on, and servants to give her cool drinks, she changes her mind and decides to play on the royal team. She tries to tell her villager friends about her change of heart but is pulled into a practice game with them and cannot bring herself to hurt their feelings. In an effort to spare everyone's feelings, she decides to pretend to have hurt her leg so that she cannot play at all, but the ruse falls apart. Following a practice game between the royals and the villagers, during which she plays on the royal team, she has a conversation with her mother about the situation. Her mother tells her to "never forget where she comes from" and to be "true to herself". This prompts Sofia to switch back to the villagers' team, where she remains. Sofia and the rest of her team win the game and the King's Cup.

The overall message in this episode is one that encourages honesty to others and also to yourself. Sofia's initial dishonesty when she switched to the royal team after agreeing to be on the villager team caused friction with her friends, and her attempt to be dishonest about hurting her leg led to embarrassment when it was revealed. The theme of "being true to yourself" and remembering where you come from, is one of honesty, but also about individuality. Being in a

position of privilege affords Sofia with the opportunity to be true to herself and not have to conform to the wishes of others.

Responsibility to Others

As defined above, responsibility to others focuses on individualism as opposed to collectivism. Dialogue or scenes where individual accomplishment is praised or rewarded is included in this category.

Helping Others is Good

For this research, the positive framing of helping others is observed through character dialogue that praises the helpful character or positive outcomes for characters that are helpful to others. Many of the episodes in the analysis contain this theme, including those discussed above, such as *Curious George's* "Monkey Market" and *Doc McStuffins'* "Wrong Side of the Law". For example, the farmers praise George for his help selling vegetables and Doc praises Officer Pete for keeping others safe in the backyard. But the following *Curious George* episode contains the most relevant content.

A particularly interesting example occurs in the *Curious George* episode "George Serves It Up". In this episode, George helps out a local restaurant owner when his only worker calls in sick. George visits the restaurant with the intention of meeting the man in the yellow hat there to eat together but notices the restaurant owner is struggling to play both of the roles of chef and waiter. On seeing his struggle, George begins playing the role of waiter, taking orders from customers. Not long after, George's dog friend Hudley joins him in assisting the restaurant owner. After several mishaps, the two being to develop a system where they can efficiently help the owner. This episode seems to promote the need for collectivism when entrepreneurs are in

need of help, which is expected in capitalist systems. George and his friend are praised by the owner of the business and the customers for their assistance with expressions of “Good job!” and “Thanks for your help”. They receive no other reward or compensation for their work.

While the episode of *Curious George* described above presents helping others in a context that benefits business owners, the *Doc McStuffins* episode “Selfless Snowman” presents a different message. Due to a shortage of fluff needed to repair stuffed animals, Doc holds a “stuffing drive” to replenish the fluff. All of Doc staff and many other stuffed animals donate some of their fluff, but Chilly the snowman is too afraid to donate. Later in the episode, a stuffed bunny comes into Doc’s office for repair, but Doc is unable to complete the repair because she is out of a rare kind of fluff that only Chilly has. Chilly’s compassion for the bunny leads him to overcome his fear and donate some of his stuffing. With his donation, Doc is able to complete the repair of the bunny.

The different presentations of helping others in these episodes is interesting in that the *Doc McStuffins* episode removes any context of profit or entrepreneurship. Doc’s clinic seems to be without profit motive and is open to any injured stuffed toy. Chilly donated out of expressed compassion for the bunny. While George’s motivations may have been similar in the above described episode, the context of sacrificing for the profit of a capitalist is very different than sacrificing out of compassion for the “health” of an individual. While the message in this *Doc McStuffins* episode does not oppose the message of the *Curious George* episode, it presents a different perspective on helping others.

Individualism

In the context of this research, individualism either refers to the desire to be free from perceived restrictions placed on an individual or a preference for accomplishing tasks alone.

While other episodes in the data contain content supportive of this theme, the following example of *Sofia the First* expresses the theme as a part of the main storyline. In the *Sofia the First* episode “The Secret Library”, Sofia is tasked with completing the stories in a hidden library deep under her castle. The stories are about actual people in her world and Sofia is charged with helping them complete their story to a happy ending. In this episode she is faced with helping a flying horse named Mazzimo. Mazzimo left Sofia’s castle in order to pursue a wild, free life without stables or an owner. In leaving, he hurt his parents and brother, who he left behind. They could not understand his desire to leave. Not long after leaving he was captured by Prince Roland from a neighboring kingdom. Sofia, her aunt, and Mazzimo’s brother attempt to save him. Their first attempt fails, resulting in the capture of Mazzimo’s brother also. And Sofia, separated from her aunt, begins to question her ability to rescue the horses. As she expresses doubt in herself, Princess Merida steps out of the forest and tells her to always believe in herself because through that belief she can accomplish anything. Sofia accepts her advice and sings, “I know that I can free them if I put my heart into it. I can lead the way. Make everything ok. I’m the one that has to save the day.” In an aerial battle with Prince Roland, Sofia frees the horses and accompanies Mazzimo to a hidden land where horses are free and wild, where he stays with other wild horses.

The themes of individualism in this episode come across in Mazzimo’s desire to pursue a life of freedom at the expense of relationships with his family and Sofia’s belief that she can accomplish anything if she believes that she can. Both of these forms of individualism are important in a neoliberal society. Willingness to sever familial bonds to pursue personal happiness, when that happiness is framed in material terms can result in an atomized society and individuals without a family support structure more common in traditional societies. Such

individuals would be more likely to have increased anxiety about losing their job because of that lack of support and would be less likely to complain about working conditions or pay. And believing that you can do anything if you believe strongly enough is beneficial to owners who depend on productive workers that see society as structured in a way that would permit such economic mobility.

While Mazzimo's individualistic desires took him away from his family, *Doc McStuffins* again provides an alternative narrative. This time about individualism and family. In the episode "Ultimate Safari: Stuffy's Safari", Doc and her friends are working at a jungle medical clinic treating stuffed jungle animals. After completing the day's work they notice that Stuffy the dragon has left a note saying that he is travelling to dragon mountain alone so that he can be with his dragon family. He comments that he has always wanted to be with others like him and hoped that they could teach him how to fly. Stuffy's friends are alarmed at reading the note and set out to find him in case he needs help. Doc and her friends find Stuffy along the path a short time later, but Stuffy is unwilling for them to accompany him. He says that the trip is too dangerous for them, and that he does not want them to be hurt. He then turns around and steps in quicksand, from which Doc and the others save him.

To Stuffy this is a validation of how dangerous the trip is and again asks them not to follow him. Stuffy proceeds along the path while the others talk about what they should do. They decide that their love for Stuffy compels them to follow him to make sure he is safe. Again, Doc and her friends save Stuffy, as they find him dangling from a tree above hungry stuffed crocodile toys. This time Stuffy agrees that they can come along with him to dragon mountain. When the group finally arrives at dragon mountain Stuffy discovers that the dragons that live there look and act nothing like him nor can they fly. They are Komodo dragons. Realizing that this is not

his family, he goes off alone to be by himself. When the others find him, he has climbed the mountain and attempts to fly with wings he has made from leaves. As he falls, Doc and her friends catch him and save him from harm. Stuffy realizes the family he was looking for are Doc and his friends at the clinic. The episode ends with a song about love and family.

A comparison of these two episodes is interesting because of the opposing narratives about individualism and family. Mazzimo leaves his family to pursue individualistic goals and is presented as achieving happiness when he is finally able to live the free life he desires. Stuffy leaves friends to go in search of his family but realizes that he had a family all along. Mazzimo searches for happiness apart from his family and Stuffy searches for happiness with his family. For Stuffy, family is a source of happiness and something worthy of taking a dangerous journey to have, but for Mazzimo, family is not something that should stand in the way of individualistic goals. Doc's narrative represents a more anti-capitalist message than Mazzimo's because of the value that it places on the importance of family and, indirectly, the support structure that family provides.

Being Selfish is Bad

In the context of this analysis, selfishness is considered to be either an unwillingness to share some personal possession or a violation of property rights where a possession is taken or damaged by someone to whom it does not belong. This theme arises in a number of episodes analyzed for this research. The following example from *Sofia the First* contains messages relevant to this theme. In the *Sofia the First* episode "Bad Little Dragon", Sofia and a friend princess from a neighboring kingdom find what appears to be a baby dragon during a walk through the forest. Vivian, Sofia's friend, decides to adopt the creature, much to the irritation of her current pet dragon, Crackle, who is jealous of the attention that Vivian gives to her new pet.

On returning to Vivian's castle, Crackle observes the new dragon, who Vivian names Crispy, talking to himself in a stereotypical gangster voice about how he will steal the royal jewels. Crackle tries to let Vivian know, but she believes that he is just jealous of the attention that she is giving the new dragon. In order to rid himself of the threat posed by Crackle, Crispy steals pies from the royal kitchen and destroys a mandolin belonging to Vivian in a way that makes it appear that Crackle is the one responsible. Vivian banishes Crackle to his outdoor dragon house, and Crispy begins his plan to steal the crown jewels. Crackle makes his way to the treasure room and is observed by Sofia's pet bunny Clover to be acting like a thief. Clover tells Sofia, who gives chase and tracks him to the treasure room, where Crispy traps Sofia. On attempting to make his escape, Crispy is accosted by Crackle, who manages to apprehend him red-handed with the treasure. The royal police then escort Crispy away to jail, and Vivian apologizes to Crackle for not believing him at first. This episode is straightforward in its depiction of property rights and the immorality of violating those rights. Crispy is a caricature of a gangster thief without depth or rationale for his actions other than selfish greed, who is ultimately punished for his deceit and theft. Speaking to Crackle, the Royal police officer says, "Royal families everywhere will be sleeping well tonight thanks to you", emphasizing the value placed in citizens who assist authorities in upholding the rule of law by confronting other citizens who may be in violation.

In the *Elena of Avalor* episode "A Spy in the Palace", the palace is infiltrated by a female character named Carla, who was shapeshifted by Shiriki with a magical potion that changed Carla's appearance. Carla and her father Victor work with Shiriki to steal Elena's mother's magical tiara that Shiriki believes will give her the power to take over all of Avalor. In return for stealing the tiara for her, Shiriki agrees to transform Carla and her father into powerful wizards. Being the first part of a series of episodes that tells this story, this episode is intended to

introduce Carla and Victor, lay the groundwork for the multi-episode story, and place Carla inside the palace where she makes a first attempt at stealing the tiara. The shapeshifted Carla, who goes by the name Rita, lies her way into the palace, where she ingratiates herself to Elena during the preparations of a festival. Rita sabotages the work of Elena's friend Naomi, who has been serving as the festival planner in order to take her place as festival planner in order to gain access to the treasure room, where the tiara is stored. Ultimately, Rita fails to steal the tiara in this episode, but is successful in gaining the trust of Elena and others in the palace.

Alone, this episode does not deliver the expected message about property rights and stealing that will likely become apparent as the story unfolds, but unlike the previously described episode of *Sophia the First*, it does provide some depth to the characters of Carla and Victor in their introduction that alludes to their motivation in seeking magical power. After being transformed into Rita, she and her father perform a rap song that provides understanding of their motivations. With rhyming lyrics, Victor asserts, "My whole life, people have always kept me down. If you met me as a kid, you would have most certainly seen a frown. Every time I stood up, they would treat me like a clown." He then exclaims that this would be changing soon. Carla then takes a turn rapping, "My whole life I couldn't have called just one place home. Dad and I were on the move. We would always have to roam. Only thing that didn't change is that I would feel alone." She also then asserts that this would be changing soon.

Later in the song Victor refers to themselves as "underdogs", and Elena asserts that they will "trade their shack for a palace". The backstory for these characters would not be out of place in any rags to riches story and would typically be seen as a worthy motivation to seek wealth. But because these characters are portrayed as villains in this episode, it seems that their motivation is framed in a negative light. Seeking wealth and/or power because you are poor is

not shown as virtuous, at least when the methods that you use would not be approved by authority figures. The series would likely approve of poor characters trying to get wealthy through entrepreneurship or working for a business owner. The following episodes in the series may provide more nuance to the message, but that data is unavailable for this study.

Table 4

Occurrence of Theme and Sub-theme by Series

Theme	<i>Elena of Avalor</i>	<i>Sofia the First</i>	<i>Doc McStuffins</i>	<i>Arthur</i>	<i>Curious George</i>	Totals
Authoritarian Imagery	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	D1, D2, D3, D4, D5	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5	C1, C2, C4	23
Authoritarianism as Part of the Natural Order	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	D1, D2, D3, D4, D5	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5	C1, C2, C4	23
Authoritarianism is Good for Us	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5	D1, D2, D3, D4, D5	A1, A2, A3, A4, A5	C1, C2, C4	23
Consumerism	E4, E5	S2, S5	D3	A4, A5	C2	8
Entrepreneurship as Part of the Natural Order	E1, E4, E5	S1, S2, S3		A1, A2, A3, A4, A5	C2, C3, C4, C5	15
Entrepreneurship is Good for Us	E1, E4, E5			A1, A2, A3, A4, A5	C2, C3, C4, C5	12
Workplace Values	E4, E5		D2	A5	C3, C4, C5	7
Power	E1, E3, E4, E5	S1, S2, S3, S5		A1, A2, A3, A4, A5	C1, C2, C4, C5	17
Value of Workers			D3			1
Honesty	E1, E2, E4	S1, S2, S3, S5	D1, D4, D5	A2, A5	C4	13
Helping Others is Good	E1, E2, E4, E5	S1, S5	D1, D2, D4, D5	A1, A3	C4, C5	14
Individualism	E1, E3, E4	S1, S4	D5			6
Being Selfish is Bad	E1, E2, E5	S1, S2, S5		A2, A4		8

Conclusion

Analysis of the 25 episodes from the 5 most popular children's cartoon series demonstrates numerous themes relevant to the support of a capitalist economy. Considering the research questions that guide this study:

1. How do cartoons targeted to preschool children portray social and economic systems?
2. What explicit and implicit messages do these cartoons convey about relationships with authority figures, consumerism, entrepreneurship, right and wrong behaviors, and responsibility to others

Analysis of the 25 children's cartoons provides insight into the answers. The first question focuses on systems that the characters in these cartoons find themselves. Analysis indicates systems of authoritarian social systems and hierarchy are very common, with the majority of all episodes in each series portraying this kind of system as natural and good through visual and verbal dialogue. The majority of episodes analyzed have some form of economic activity, with capitalism being the only economic system portrayed in any episode. Like authoritarianism, this system is framed as being natural and good for society, usually occurring indirectly outside the main plot of the episode.

The second research question focuses on the specific messages relevant to the categories described in chapter 3. As seen in Table 3 below, the prevalence of these messages or themes range from unique, occurring in only one episode, to very common, making an appearance in almost every episode. All categories were found to have multiple examples, with authoritarianism and entrepreneurship themes more likely to be expressed through implicit messages than explicit dialogue.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The research questions guiding this study seek to understand the social and economic systems in children's cartoons as well as understand the messages related to those systems that are expressed through the media. It is important to ask these critical questions about texts that children are consuming because of how ubiquitous media has become in the lives of children, particularly when media is used as a form of diversion by parents who are busy with other things. Computers, phones, tablets, watches, cars, virtual reality devices, and even modern kitchen appliances now have screens that transmit media and their associated narratives to children. Awareness of those messages is important to making informed decisions about what media children should be allowed to watch, as well as to challenging how those messages position us as individuals and as a society.

To answer these questions, 25 randomly selected episodes of the most popular children's cartoons rated Y7 or G were analyzed. These children's cartoons were determined to be popular based on ranking at the IMDB.com website and included 5 episodes of each of the following cartoons: *Elena of Avalor*, *Sofia the First*, *Doc McStuffins*, *Arthur*, and *Curious George*. *Elena of Avalor*, *Sofia the First*, and *Doc MuStuffins* are produced by Disney Corporation, while *Arthur* and *Curious George* were originally produced by PBS.

Each of the 25 episodes were transcribed and coded based on a close reading of the transcripts in conjunction with viewing of each episode. Coding was based on a Marxist framework that categorized dialogue and visual elements into the following themes: Relationship to Authority Figures, Consumerism, Entrepreneurship, Lessons about Right and Wrong, Responsibility to Others. As described in the conceptual framework, these initial themes included the possibility of coding for both pro-capitalist and anti-capitalist curriculum. The themes were further divided into subthemes that were identified during data analysis. Episodes were labeled as representative of a theme or subtheme if the theme or subtheme was considered to be indicative of the overall message of the episode or if they contained dialogue, interactions, or environmental conditions indicative of that theme or subtheme.

Results of the analysis indicate that there are significant social and economic messages present in the most popular cartoons that were selected for analysis. These messages reinforce authoritarian relationships through visual elements and dialogue in a way that makes such relationships natural and always present. Messages relevant to economic systems were also common and are expressed through dialogue and visual depictions. Messages relevant to economics were always expressed through a capitalist lens and most often expressed values that would be relevant to the interests of business owners. These are discussed below.

Discussion

Results of the analysis indicates the social systems presented in the series were hierarchal systems that were expressed in the cartoons as monarchy in the cases of *Sofia the First* and *Elena of Avalor*, doctor/patient relationships in *Doc McStuffins*, teacher/student relationships in *Arthur*, and employer/employee relationships in *Curious George*. These hierarchal systems were portrayed as a natural part of the world in that they exist as a part of the environment, outside any

dialogue. They are a part of the setting where the characters play their roles. The results also indicate capitalist economic systems in all series. Business owners, their employees, and the customers that visit those businesses are commonly depicted engaging in the buying and selling of goods or services.

The hierarchical social systems and capitalist economic system portrayed in the series represent a reflection of real-world systems. As Mittell (2009) described, reflections in media are often distorted, and in this case, the systems presented in cartoon media demonstrate only a part of these systems. We do not see the real-world poverty of working class individuals who work similar jobs as those in these cartoons. Cafeteria workers, retail workers, and other service employees are all commonly seen in these cartoons, but they are divorced from depictions of the impact of the low wages that almost always accompanies these types of jobs. In the real world, these individuals would be classified as the working poor, who are at a higher risk of being in poverty due to their low wages (Nelson, 2021).

While the portrayal of social and economic systems in the cartoons depict a capitalist, hierarchical world, messages in the series also support these systems. These messages relate to authoritarian relationships, consumerism, entrepreneurship, lessons about behaviors, and responsibilities to others. Authoritarian relationships normalize employer/employee relationships. Consumerism normalizes satisfying desire through consumption. Entrepreneurship normalizes the utilization of labor for the purpose of profit seeking. Lessons about right and wrong behaviors teaches proper behaviors that are beneficial to employers. Responsibilities to Others also encourages some behaviors that would likely benefit employers. The curriculum expressed through each of these themes, when viewed with a Marxist lens, leans decidedly toward narratives that support the capitalist system. But, as described in more detail below, the

curriculum may also be seen as expressing values that are beneficial to individuals. Each of these themes are explored in more detail below.

Relationship to Authority Figures

Authoritarian relationships were commonly depicted in all series, which is supportive of the possibility that depictions of authoritarian relationships are common in children's cartoons. Because Cultivation Theory asserts that a message should be widespread for it to influence society, this may also be as evidence that these depictions of authoritarian relationships are influencing society. These relationships include authoritarian relationships between royals and commoners in all episodes of *Elena of Avalor* (5/5) and *Sofia the First* (5/5), represented not just in the royal garb, but in the attitudes of servants and employees to the royal families.

Authoritarian relationships between teachers and students were observed in every episode of *Arthur* (5/5), with students following directions and worrying about consequences. Authoritarian relationships between employers and employees were observed in *Elena of Avalor* (5/5), *Sofia the First* (3/5), *Arthur* (3/5), *Doc McStuffins* (5/5), and *Curious George* (3/5). In all of these series, scenes were set in workplaces where employees followed directions of employers to varying degrees. Authoritarian relationships between rich and poor were seen in *Elena of Avalor* (3/5), *Sofia the First* (3/5), *Arthur* (5/5), and *Curious George* (3/5). Usually, the wealthy individuals dressed and/or behaved in ways that indicated an imbalance in the relationship, with rich characters depicted as better dressed, more aloof, or speaking in a way that indicated they expect to be listened to.

Authoritarian relationships in these series are presented as a natural and normal part of the world. Usually such relationships are unremarked about and are presented without acknowledgement. These relationships appear in the series without justification. It is accepted

that an employer will have authority over employees or that royalty will have authority over commoners. No explanation is provided. There are those who create the rules and those who follow them. For example, the gargoyles in *Sofia the First* are expected to follow the rules or be turned to stone. Sofia's aunt creates the rules, and they are expected to follow them or be punished. In *Curious George*, Mr. Glass speaks to others with authority and they obey, based only on his position of power and wealth in the community. In *Arthur*, Muffy's family makes the rules of employment for their butler. He is free to follow the rules or find other work, where he would be subject to other rules. Each of these examples presents a different type of authoritarian relationship. Some might be considered more problematic than others in the context of the episode. Clearly the situation with the gargoyles in *Sofia the First* is different than Muffy's butler in *Arthur*, but none of the episodes presents these relationships as problematic. Normalizing such relationships has the potential to be problematic when individuals do not freely place themselves under the authority of others. A choice is not free when there is the threat of some punishment and alternatives are not available. With this in mind, the authoritarian relationships are not freely chosen by the individuals in the cartoons. They are presented as natural and normal, and by implication, just.

The importance of such messages relates to the dependence of capitalism on the submission of employees to authority figures, particularly the employers. While such submission to employers may be argued to be voluntary, dependence on employers for a wage results in the involuntary submission for survival (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021). The normalization of hierarchies in children's cartoons promotes acceptance of real world workplace hierarchies that require individuals to give up personal freedom and submit to control over almost every aspect of their life for a large part of each day.

Consumerism

Some form of consumerism was also noted in all five series. Characters expressing a desire for some material good appeared in one third of the episodes. Consumerism is also important to capitalism, because desire drives economic activity. Characters in the episodes were never observed expressing a contentment with what they already have. They never decided that they did not need the item that they desired. They were usually depicted as eventually fulfilling their desire, which was commonly for something that they wanted for themselves, not for others. Usually when consumerism was observed in the episodes, the characters were depicted as desiring some personal possession or delectable treat. The item sometimes related to the plot, as in the *Arthur* episode “Francine’s Cleats of Strength”, where Francine desires a new pair of cleats that are more elaborate than those she currently has. She spends the episode working in order to have the money to buy those cleats. Other times the item is not part of the plot and is a delicious food or dessert that the character becomes aware of and desires, as was the case in several episodes of *Elena of Avalor* and *Curious George*.

These kind of messages in children’s cartoons are relevant because being driven by materialistic desires supports the economic activity of capitalism, supports the labor force, and decreases the ability to save money for a time when you can decide not to work. It is also interesting that in the episodes depicting consumerist themes, the desires expressed were almost exclusively for personal gain. None of the episodes in this sample portrayed characters desiring groceries to donate to a local food pantry or desiring books or tools to learn a new skill or even a birthday gift for a family member. While this self-centered desire was common in all episodes, there was an interesting class distinction in the way that those desires were expected to be fulfilled. When a rich character expressed desire, the expectation was that that desire be

immediately fulfilled, like in the *Curious George* episode where Mr. Glass desires an apple tree to complement the landscaping of his new hotel. The tree was given to him without payment at his request. But when a poor or working-class individual expresses a desire, there is usually some form of delayed gratification in place where the character is depicted as needing to work or save money in order to get the item, like in the *Arthur* episode where Muffy desired new pair of cleats. Muffy's father could not afford the cleats without working additional hours, so Muffy decided to work to help pay for them.

Entrepreneurship

Half of all episodes depicted some form of entrepreneurship. These messages were found in every series except *Doc McStuffins*. The other four series, *Elena of Avalor* (3/5), *Sofia the First* (3/5), *Arthur* (4/5), and *Curious George* (4/5) commonly showed economic activity either in the background with shops and merchants selling their wares, or as a part of the plot where main characters are participating in the economic activity, either as a business owner or a worker. The economic system portrayed was always capitalist, with the business owner or worker sometimes depicted as accepting money for some item. Other times the exchange of money was not shown, but the system was assumed to be capitalist based on other indicators, like a list of prices for items or the authoritarian relationships between employers and employees. Normalization of this economic model in cartoons sends the message that entrepreneurship and business ownership is a positive goal and that the capitalist system is a natural part of the world. According to Marxist Media Theory, it is expected that capitalism be presented without a viable alternative in media. And this appears to be the case because more democratic workplace models, like worker cooperatives, were never depicted. Additionally, it is interesting to note the discrepancy between portrayals of entrepreneurship in the series and the real world. When

characters are depicted as buying things, they are never seen visiting large corporate chain stores. They always visit small locally owned businesses or farms. The worlds that these characters inhabit are distorted reflections of our real world (Mittell, 2009). These reflections present a kind of idealized capitalist system without corporate monopolies or conglomerates that would prevent such a dominance of locally owned businesses. This misrepresentation gives a false impression about the viability of starting one's own business.

Lessons about Right and Wrong

Several messages about right and wrong relevant to a capitalist economy were expressed in the series. These messages are all meaningful in different ways. Workplace values relates to work ethic, efficiency, or productivity. None of these values are problematic when they are applied by free individuals who are acting of their own accord to accomplish their own goals. They only become problematic in situations where the individual who holds these values is under the authority of another who profits from them, unless the individual has freely placed themselves under that authority (Chomsky, 2014). In the case of the viewers of these series, it is unclear if these workplace values would have any positive benefit to children at an age where play is their most important form of learning. It seems to me that efficient or productive play may be an oxymoron. More specifically, the idea of play seems to include inefficiency. Being productive at playing does not make much sense to me. Considering the likely age group viewing these series, it seems that the rationale for including such workplace values in the episodes cannot be for the immediate benefit of children. The most charitable position that I can see would be that these values would be taken later into life and applied by free individuals seeking their own goals. But Marxist Media Theory indicates that this is probably not the reason for their inclusion in these cartoons. Likely this inclusion is for the benefit of future employers.

Other values expressed under this theme, like honesty, would be useful to children of the age expected to view these cartoons. Learning not to take things that do not belong to you is an important value to learn at any age. Here there is some overlap between developmentally useful values that are beneficial to individuals and society and those that are beneficial to employers. Marxist Media Theory would assert that this overlap is incidental. Were these values not beneficial to employers, they would not be a part of the series. It is interesting to note that values or belief systems that would not be beneficial to employers were not observed in these series. Missing were values related to spirituality, solidarity, compassion, and other values outside those that would be useful to employers.

According to Chomsky, promotion of workplace values represents “a smokescreen for perpetuating unjust [capitalist] economic systems” that are meant to extract maximum labor from the working class while robbing them of their “free will” (Brian, 2021). *Arthur* and *Doc McStuffins* were observed to be most likely to promote these kind of values. As described in the analysis, *Arthur*'s lessons about work ethic and *Doc McStuffins*' lessons about efficiency are messages relevant to business owners who desire to maximize the labor that they can extract from employees. Business owners are keen to limit expenses and extracting as much labor as possible from current employees means that they may not need to hire additional employees, which would be additional expenses that would reduce profits.

Responsibility to Others

Responsibility to Others categorizes themes that relate to individualism, helping others, and selfishness. Being helpful to others was a particularly common theme that appeared in every series, with 14/25 episodes having significant content related to this theme. Working together as a group and negative portrayals of selfishness were also seen in many episodes of each series.

Several episodes of *Sofia the First* and *Elena of Avalor* depicted selfish, flawed individuals who tried to steal from the royal families. These individuals were ultimately made to answer for their crimes. Additionally, in all episodes there was some level of teamwork. Arthur and his group of friends, *Doc McStuffins* and her crew of stuff animal helpers, Sofia and her animal companions, all were seen working together at some point in each episode to accomplish some goal. Both teamwork and not stealing are beneficial values for individuals and children of any age group. Whether at work or in a social setting being able to work with others and not steal is a valuable skill. While being helpful, working with others, and not stealing are important skills for everyone to learn in order to have a strong society, having employees with these values and skills is also very valuable to business owners. Teamwork and harmony in the workplace increase productivity, which increases profits for owners. And having employees that do not steal is also important to employers. As was the case for the values described in Lessons about Right and Wrong, Marxist Media Theory would assert that the values of helping others, working together and not stealing are there in order to benefit employers. Overlap of values that are valuable to individuals and business owners is acceptable, but values that are not helpful to business owners would not be included.

Individualism was less commonly depicted than other values in this theme, with 6/25 episodes having characters that express individualistic tendencies. Individualism can be seen as a positive or negative value. In western societies individualism is commonly depicted as a strength, particularly in fictional stories of the rugged entrepreneur who earned a fortune on his or her own without needing the help of others. Relying on others is often depicted as a weakness. It is easy for capitalists to exploit individuals with this worldview, particularly when those individuals are separated from family and support systems that were abandoned due to

individualistic tendencies. Expression of this kind of individualism was most explicitly seen in *Sofia the First's* episode with the horse Mazzimo who desired to be free from his home at the palace. Ultimately Mazzimo found freedom and fulfillment in another land with other wild horses apart from his family, who remained at the palace. Mazzimo's actions could be viewed as selfish, because he essentially abandoned any responsibility he had to his family and the palace in order to seek happiness. Or they could be viewed as positive if seeking individual happiness is most important. Marxist Media Theory asserts that this kind of message is valuable to employers because of the precarious position that it places on those who reject family and support networks in favor of fulfilling individualistic desires and could also be seen as a rejection of the solidarity needed for effective collective action against employers. Encouraging the rejection of solidarity in favor of individualism is corrosive to union cohesion and promotes scab behavior.

While the narratives present in the children's cartoons analyzed for this study were found to be decidedly pro-capitalist, it is interesting to consider how narratives might differ in a pro-Marxist cartoon. With Marxism being a critique of capitalism, I would suggest that this kind of cartoon would first make the economic narrative clear, as opposed to being in the background as in the cartoons analyzed for this study. The capitalist economy would take a prominent role in the setting, as the narrative of the cartoon demonstrated its contradictions about various issues, including the means of production, labor, and the environment. A pro-Marxist cartoon would inherently be a critique of capitalism but might also demonstrate more humane and people-centered ways of living. Worker cooperatives might be depicted as replacing capitalist ownership of business. Nature might be depicted as something to respect instead of exploit. And the values and belief systems depicted might express class consciousness among the working class that is so important to the struggle against the capitalist system.

Fostering Learned Behavior

The cartoons explored in this study meet all of Bandura's (2009) requirements for learned behaviors. As such, these cartoons first capture children's attention with their entertaining animations and stories. The interesting music, colorful visual effects, characters of similar age as viewers, and dialogue with a vocabulary that children understand all serve to draw children's attention. Second, in addition to these attention drawing characteristics, the cartoons also make the characters relatable to viewers through situations and plot devices designed to make the narrative engaging to children. Children become increasingly social and engaged with others at the ages targeted by these cartoons, and the narratives always include frequent interactions with others in social situations that would be interesting to children. Third, although some magical or superhuman behaviors of the characters in these cartoons are not repeatable by viewers, the messages explored in this research are of a nature in which they are accessible and repeatable by viewers of the series. For example, viewers who see and internalize messages of respect for authority figures may exhibit similar behaviors when in situations where authority figures are present in real life.

At times this repeatability is only an internal action by viewers that involves a belief or understanding about the world. For example, when only presented with capitalist economic models, a viewer might come to believe that the employer/employee model is without alternative, when other more democratic models exist, like co-operative businesses. Viewers would likely not be in a position to start their own business when viewing the cartoons, but their worldviews and beliefs are being influenced for a future time when this might be a possibility for them. Finally, the series sometimes motivate viewers to accept the messages presented. Through positive outcomes for characters, viewers may associate good things happening with the

worldview presented through these cartoons. For example, helping business owners in *Curious George* often results in some perceived benefit to characters or their community. This may come in the form of praise, money, or some new shopping experience for the community. Even though the episodes often depict these positive outcomes, Bandura (2009) asserts that this kind of motivation is not always necessary for learned behaviors, so when positive outcomes are not depicted for characters in the cartoons, the ubiquitous nature of messages in their environment still shapes understanding of the world.

While Bandura (2009) theorizes how individual viewers of these series learn through media, Gerbner's (1998) Cultivation Theory illustrates how these series would shape the beliefs of society. Gerbner's (1998) theory needs two criteria to be in place for media influence to be widespread. These criteria are a ubiquitous technology through which messages can be disseminated and a hegemony of the ideas expressed in those messages, where the ideas expressed share a common worldview and exclude opposing ones. The series explored in this research are presented on technologies that are widespread, namely television, computers, phones, or other streaming devices. The series chosen are also considered to be the most popular children's cartoons, according to the online media database IMDB.com. Messaging on the topics explored in this research indicates that many of the same messages are expressed in multiple or all series. These two conditions are sufficient to satisfy the requirements described by Gerbner's Cultivation Theory for influencing the beliefs of a society.

The motivation to shape the beliefs of society through the methods described above is based on the particular needs of capitalism. As discussed in Chapter 2, capitalism works best when individuals accept certain views about the world (Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021), including beliefs about hierarchy, consumerism, entrepreneurship, values in the workplace, and

responsibility. These values are reflected in the categories explored during the analysis of these children's cartoons. Analysis indicates that the values expressed in children's cartoons do reflect values that tend to support a capitalist economy, which is predicted by Marxist Media Theory in its assertion that the role of media is to reproduce the dominant capitalist ideology.

Fostering a worldview beneficial to capitalism would work best when the messages meet the characteristics described by Cultivation Theory. These characteristics include widespread and consistent messaging. As described in Chapter 2, media consolidation has resulted in ever fewer media companies from which those messages originate. Evidence of this media consolidation is seen in this research, where the 5 most popular children's cartoons were products of two media corporations, Disney and PBS. Marxist Media Theory asserts that this kind of media consolidation facilitates the spread of capitalist ideology, and it is interesting to note that despite differing business models and sources of funding, Disney and PBS's most popular children's cartoons had remarkably similar themes that were relevant to this research. Although each of the series analyzed in this study has different writers and producers, the messages are similar because those writing and producers are hired for these jobs and remain employed in these jobs because they have a certain worldview that comes across in the media that they produce (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

Limitations

The constraints placed on this study in order to make it a manageable project that could be completed in a reasonable amount of time necessitated the inclusion of a limited number of media programs. Five of the most popular children's cartoons were included, which is a relatively small sample of all children's cartoon media available. As described above, these five programs were produced by only two media corporations, Disney and PBS. The limited number

of series and the limited number of media corporations producing those series make it possible that other messages outside those considered for the themes and subthemes of this research could dominate the content of the majority of children's cartoons. Additionally, only five episodes of each program were explored for relevant content. Although random selection of episodes would make it more likely that the themes observed were to be found in other episodes as well, there is always the possibility that the episodes included in this study are not representative of the messages that could be found in the rest of the series. Finally, this research considered children would likely be watch these series in a linear fashion, from beginning to end. Online content of cartoon media is sometimes delivered in clips of entire episodes. If children are consuming media in this way, there is the possibility that they would internalize different messages about the content than those who watch the entire episode in a linear way.

Additionally, with two of the most popular children's cartoons being based in a royal kingdom, there is the possibility that the authoritarian relationship data may indicate a heavier emphasis on this theme than would typically be seen in other cartoons due to the authoritarian nature of royalty. Although the data might look different if other cartoons were analyzed, there remains the issue of popularity of royal themes, particularly princesses. There does seem to be a fascination in our society with both real-life royal figures, as well as cartoon royalty. This limitation may be a reflection of our society's interest in the trappings of power and prestige.

If other methods of choosing which shows to include in the data were used, the results of the study might also be different. Possibilities include, using popular live action programs like Sesame Street or Blue's Clues or basing popularity on the amount of toys that a series generates. Shows like Paw Patrol and Peppa Pig, while not considered the most popular by IMDB.com, have plentiful amounts of merchandise that may make them popular in ways outside of media,

which in turn might attract more viewers. Modifying the parameters of how shows were chosen in these ways could demonstrate the appearance of different narratives.

Another limitation is related to the suitability of the metric used to determine popularity of the cartoons analyzed in this research. Determining the total number of viewers of a series was difficult due to the many different platforms that individuals use to watch media, so popularity was determined by a popular media database website, IMDB.com. Other metrics could yield different results when measuring popularity.

Finally, limitations related to the deductive approach of the analysis of each series raise the possibility of relevant data being missed. It is possible that additional pro- or anti-capitalist messages exist in the series that were not accounted for in the conceptual framework. Themes that were outside the scope of the five categories would not have been included in the analysis, even though those themes might have informed the analysis.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are based on the limitations of this study and on the expectation of finding additional messages in other forms of media. As described above, one limitation of the current study relates to the difficulty in finding an objective metric about the popularity of children's cartoons. Due to the wide variety of platforms and technologies on which children consume media, no authoritative and definitive source was found on the popularity of various children's cartoons, this research relied on a popular online media database for a measure of relative popularity. While this approach provided a reasonable grounding to measure popularity, it is possible that the metrics used were insufficient to accurately capture the children's cartoons that are being viewed by the most individuals. Future research on this topic

could seek other measures of popularity that might provide a more reliable picture of the number of viewers of children's cartoons.

Another suggestion for future research relates to the limited number of series explored in this study. Because only five programs were analyzed, there is the opportunity to explore a great many other children's cartoons. A study that examined 20 or more of the most popular children's cartoons for capitalist messages would provide an even greater insight into the prevalence or absence of these messages in children's cartoon media. Additionally, while examining a greater number of children's cartoons is important to better understanding how economic systems may be portrayed and how the messages that support those systems may be portrayed in children's cartoons, expanding the analysis to include children's books and children's movies would also provide greater insight into the prevalence of absence of these messages.

Additionally, it is important that future research also seek to understand messages that young adult viewers are likely to consume. It is possible programming targeted to teens has similar capitalist themes and that exposure to pro-capitalist propaganda is ongoing throughout childhood for consumers of popular media. Future research should critically examine popular video games, movies, and other media targeted to teens for themes relevant to a capitalist economy.

Finally, understanding how capitalist messages in children's cartoons have evolved over time would be an important contribution to Marxist Media Theory. It would be important to understand if these messages were more prevalent during times of strong anti-communist sentiment in the United States, or if they have remained relatively constant over time. A longitudinal study of the five most popular children's cartoons by decade over the past 80-100 years would give insight into changes in narrative that might have taken place during important

political periods, such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the Great Depression, both World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the Cold War. Understanding how political events have shaped media narratives would be important in predicting how future children's cartoons narratives might be impacted real-world events.

Implications

Because this research indicates the presence of messages supportive of our capitalist system in the most popular children's cartoons, it is important that real-world actions be considered. In an educational setting, teachers of young children of the ages targeted by the programs analyzed in this research should teach them to always ask questions when presented with any media. In doing so, teachers should understand what it means to take a critical approach when reading a text. According to McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004)

Reading from a critical perspective involves thinking beyond the text to understand issues such as why the author wrote about a particular topic, wrote from a particular perspective, or chose to include some ideas about the topic and exclude others. (p. 13)

When presenting a text to students, teachers should teach them to recognize the messages in that text. Teachers should point out the assumptions and messages that the text makes about class, poverty, workers, economics, and materialism and teach students to question who those messages benefit. An important strategy that teachers can use to guide students is one of switching perspective (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004). In using this strategy, teachers encourage students to explore different perspectives by asking how the story would be different if something changed. For example, "How would this story change if the main character was poor?" or "How would this story change if a character didn't do what he/she was told to do by authority figures?" Teaching students to ask these kind of questions when viewing media will

help them think critically about messages that they are exposed to and to understand the importance of valuing other perspectives.

For parents who are concerned about the kind of messages expressed in children's cartoons, I would suggest that they critically watch these cartoons to understand the narratives expressed. And only allow their children to watch if they find them acceptable. Parents should also teach children to never watch media uncritically. Until children are able to recognize the messages that media presents to them and ask the important questions described above, they should not watch it alone. Parents should be prepared to watch media with their children in order to guide them in asking questions about the narratives and messages shown. As with their teachers, important questions would relate to different perspectives and assumptions in the text. Still, it is likely that many parents would not find capitalist propaganda objectionable even if they recognized it as such. For those parents, it would still be important to teach their children to ask critical questions and understand that the messages are there. It is important that individuals understand when they are being manipulated by propaganda whether they agree with the message or not, and teaching children to think critically about media is an important step.

While internet media has provided opportunity for democratization of narratives that are expressed in our society, there is concern that the same consolidation that has happened in traditional forms of media is happening in online media as well. For example, one of the largest platforms for individual expression is Youtube.com. Youtube.com was recently purchased by Google, which is largely owned by the same two financial institutions that own large parts of every major media corporation, Vanguard Group, Inc. and Blackrock, Inc. Along with this consolidation comes concerns about censorship. Youtube channels are frequently removed when their content is found to be in violation of their terms of service. Arguments that 1st Amendment

protections to freedom of speech not applying to private companies, while technically true, ring hollow when private companies own the way we communicate with each other in the modern world. In order to limit the possibility of this kind of censorship and give voice to alternate worldviews, it is important that these large media conglomerates be broken up. As described in Chapter 2, media mergers have resulted in the majority of all media being produced by five corporations. It seems likely in such a situation that alternate viewpoints would be marginalized. Reducing the dominance that these corporations have on the narratives that our society is exposed to is vital so that other views about how our society and economy works can be understood. Media that provides alternate narratives about the themes explored in this study can help lay the foundation for a more democratic society. For example, alternate narratives about consumerism might teach viewers to be less materialistic and charitable to others. Understandings like this one are an important first step for future reform or replacement of our capitalist system.

Finally, for Marxists and critical theorists, I hope that this research creates a viable framework that can be used for the further analysis of media and that it contributes to a larger discussion about the application of critical literacy techniques to media produced in capitalist countries, which might include a comparison of children's cartoons produced in the United States with those produced in other countries that might have different economic systems. Ultimately, I hope that this research can be extended by like-minded individuals who believe that working class solidarity can make the world a better place for all.

Conclusion

While critical feminist, racial, and gendered explorations of media are not uncommon, Marxist critiques of children's media are relatively rare. This study hopes to contribute to the

critical dialogue focused on this type of media and lay a foundation for further research to better understand the propaganda children are exposed to. In this study children's cartoons were found to support hierarchy and capitalism through both visual imagery and character dialogue. Through social learning and Cultivation Theory models, the messages in these cartoons are likely to influence children's worldviews and beliefs systems in ways that benefit business owners and the capitalist system.

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