

The global girl's body

In order to attain Barbie's figure (classic edition) a woman would have to be between 6'2" and 7'4" tall or have one rib removed. From a medical point of view she would very likely be suffering from a slipped disc, respiratory problems, and osteoporosis; moreover, she would be infertile: certainly a very unhealthy person. One look at children's TV reveals a series of similarly unhealthy skinny female characters, particularly in those programmes marketed on a global scale. We have examined the body measurements of 102 animated girl and young adult women characters in the context of a media analysis con-

ducted in 24 countries (see Götz et al. in this issue). Measurements were taken of hips, waist, shoulders, and height using stills of frontal views, and the following ratios were calculated (see an example in fig. 1):

- 1 waist-to-hip ratio (WHR)
- 2 waist-to-shoulder ratio (WSR)
- 3 upper body – lower body ratio (UB/LB)

Girl characters with wasp waists ... First, the ratio between hip measurement and waist measurement was determined for all of the characters. Slim, healthy women and girls have a waist-to-hip ratio between 0.69 and

0.80. More than half of the cartoon characters (58 %) have a value below this naturally achievable one (see fig. 2). Some of the wasp waists presented would hardly accommodate a spinal column, as in the case of Bloom (*Winx Club*) or Yoko (*Team Galaxy*).



Fig. 1: Video print of Bloom (*Winx Club*) with measurements

Next, the ratio between waist and shoulder was measured. Slim, healthy women and girls have a waist-to-shoulder ratio between 0.69 and 0.80. This value, however, only applies to 16 % of cartoon characters, with Bibi Blocksberg and Lena (*Skyland*) being positive examples. Aside from these, every other character falls below or is on the same level with Barbie (0.6), such as, for instance, Sasha from *Bratz* or Kim Possible. These values would not only be unhealthy: they would be unattainable even with cosmetic surgery. The problem involved here is not only the impossibility of the goal, but also the sexualisation that goes along with it. A lower value with respect to these two dimensions indicates a waist-sexualised figure ("wasp waist"). As the analysis reveals, only 17 % of the characters have no accentuated waist, such as the positive examples Cindy (*Jimmy Neutron*) and Trixie (*American Dragon*). Yet, it is precisely the absence of a wasp waist that typically characterises the body of a child or young girl. The presented body formulas of the animated girl characters, then, do not represent child or young girl char-

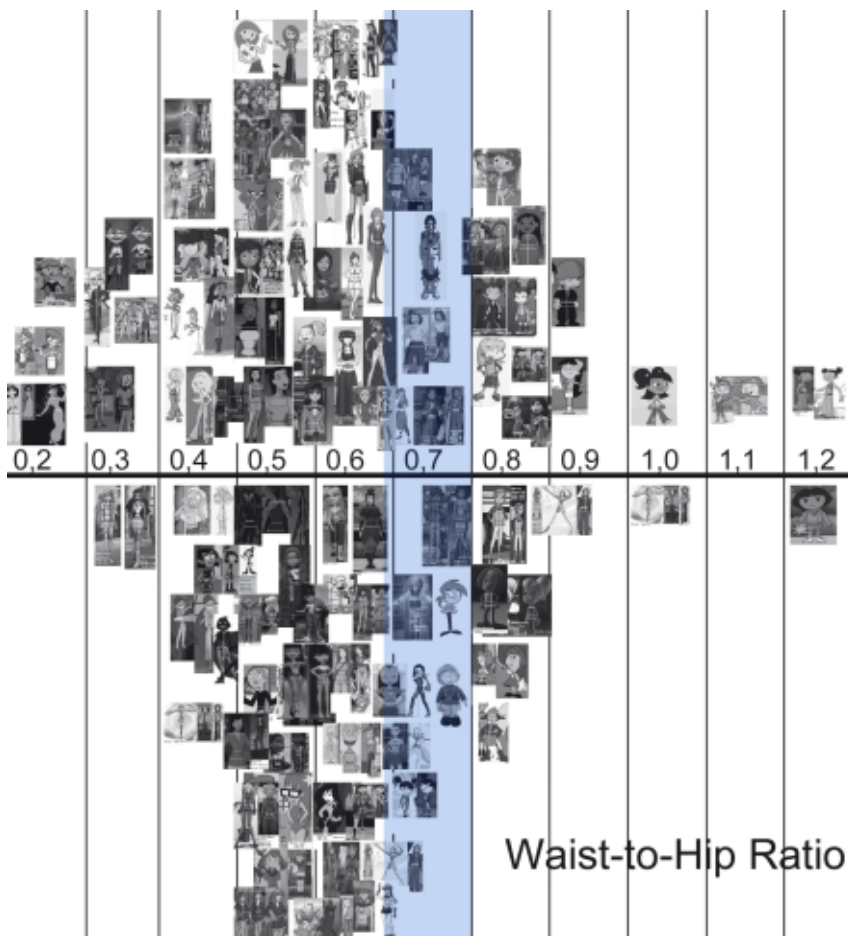


Fig. 2: Waist-to-hip ratios in cartoon girl characters, the area highlighted in blue shows the actual range of waist-to-hip ratios of girls and women. A very low ratio signifies a "wasp waist".

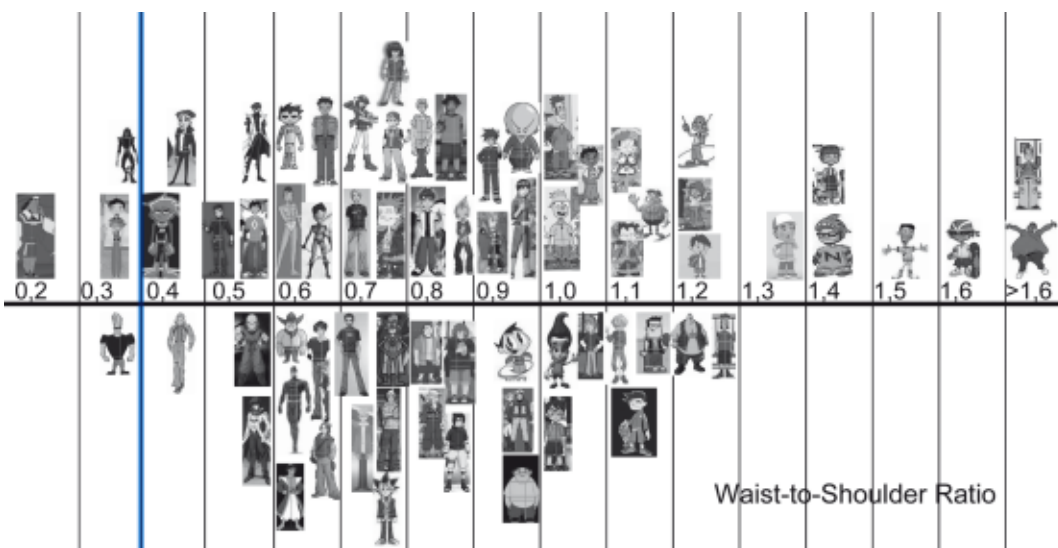


Fig. 3: Waist-to-shoulder ratios in male cartoon characters. The ratio between 0.2 and 0.4 signifies a “V-shaped form”, which cannot be achieved naturally.

acters, but instead little girls’ bodies that have been sexualised, or, put more simply: “Girls as sex bombs”. In the domain of children’s TV, though, this hardly seems appropriate or sensible.

... and long, long legs

As a third step, each of the 102 female characters was measured for the ratio between torso and lower body. As a reference: the body of a child or young woman has an upper body-to-lower-body ratio between 0.32 and 0.42. And again, the results present a problematic picture. More than half of the female cartoon characters (57 %) have legs longer than could ever be achieved naturally. Nearly every third character has legs longer than even Barbie’s. Extreme examples to be named here are DeeDee (*Dexter’s Laboratory*) and the *Bratz* girls.

Are only girl and women characters sexualised?

With the boy and men characters there are also significant stylisations and also sexualisation. An analysis of 71 global boy and men characters shows that there is a range of male characters with V-shaped torsos, like one could only achieve by working out professionally for years. That

would be the male equivalent to the wasp waist. In comparison, however, there are considerably fewer boy/men characters like that than girl/women characters (see fig. 3). In addition to the stylised characters, however, there are boy or men characters, who are clearly overweight, who have ball-shaped bodies or who are “beanpoles” as well as boys who have perfectly normal bodies. The range of physical features is considerably wider and the number of characters who are not sexualised is high. The partial dominance of unnatural body images as well as sexualisation does not only apply to girl characters.

Conclusion

The result of the study is unequivocal. Depending on the analysis method, 57 to 65 % of the “global female characters” have an extremely curvy body with a small wasp waist and entirely unnaturally long legs. These are signs of an exaggerated, sexualised image of the female body, an image unworthy of aspiration and which, in any event, could only be attained by means of surgery and at the cost of damage to one’s health. While the classic Barbie is criticised as an unsuitable role model, such criticism

applies even more to a large number of the globally marketed cartoon girls and teenagers.

Of course it could be objected that both Barbie and the cartoon characters are merely fabricated, that their presentation follows artistic forms of expression whose purpose is not to represent reality and which, consequently, should

not be pitted against reality. Yet it is striking that these creative symbolisations show so definite a tendency. In this case, gender sensitivity means acknowledging the one-dimensional unnaturalness of the bodies and reflecting on their dramaturgical necessity.

It would be exaggerated to presume a stimulus-response effect on the young viewers: they are not likely to aspire to the same physical look appearing in *Winx Club* or *Bratz* after seeing it once. Yet it is certain that the characters’ physical appearance is not entirely without meaning either. Various studies have clearly demonstrated that body schemata especially are adopted as inner images. The reduction of the beauty ideal to an overly slim body and the increasing discontent with one’s own appearance are inevitable consequences, because, compared with those of the female TV characters, one’s own body can only be regarded as deficient. ■

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