

The Social Construction of Moral Authority in Children's Character Learning: A Media-Based Perspective

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Abstract: In the digital era, children are increasingly exposed to media content that shapes their perceptions, behaviors, and moral understanding from an early age. Fictional characters in films, animations, and digital games often serve as alternative role models alongside parents and teachers. This study examines children's preferences in learning character values from non-human media characters compared to real human figures. Employing a descriptive quantitative approach, data were collected through a questionnaire administered to children aged 8–12 years, focusing on their attitudes toward fictional media characters and adults as sources of moral learning. The findings reveal that children tend to show stronger positive preferences toward non-human characters, indicating that media-based figures function as influential moral references in contemporary childhood. These results suggest a potential shift in moral authority from parents and teachers to media characters within children's character education. This study highlights the need to reconsider character education strategies in the digital era by acknowledging the growing role of media in shaping children's moral understanding.

Keywords: character education, children, media characters, moral authority, digital media.

I. INTRODUCTION

Character education for children has traditionally relied on parents and teachers as the primary moral authorities who model values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility. However, in contemporary digital contexts, children are increasingly exposed to media characters that actively shape their understanding of good and bad behavior (Cahyani et al., 2025; Suma et al., 2023; Tammasse et al., 2025). This shift raises a critical concern: children may now learn character values more intensively from fictional and media-based figures than from real human role models in their everyday lives.

Children today grow up in a media-saturated environment where animated characters, virtual figures, and online personalities are deeply embedded in their daily routines. Characters such as Elsa from *Frozen*, Spider-Man, and popular YouTube Kids content creators are not only sources of entertainment but also figures children admire, imitate, and emotionally connect with. These characters often display moral traits such as bravery, kindness, independence, and resilience, which are repeatedly reinforced through narratives and visual storytelling. As a result, children may internalize these values through media exposure rather than direct interpersonal guidance.

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon can be explained through social constructionism, which views moral understanding as socially produced through interaction, symbols, and repeated exposure rather than fixed transmission (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). In recent developments, scholars argue that digital media has become a powerful social environment where meanings, identities, and moral frameworks are continuously constructed (Livingstone, 2022; Dalyan et al., 2024; Tammasse et al., 2019). Media characters function as symbolic agents that provide children with moral scripts, emotional cues, and behavioral models that feel accessible and

relatable.

In addition, media mediation theory highlights how digital media reshapes social relationships and authority structures, including the role of adults in children's moral development (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Holloway & Green, 2023). Media figures often deliver moral lessons through action-driven narratives rather than explicit instruction, making them more engaging for children. This aligns with affective learning theory, which emphasizes that emotional attachment plays a central role in the internalization of values (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Lanta et al., 2022; Rahim et al., 2024).

This study focuses on children aged 8 to 12 years, a developmental stage commonly referred to as middle childhood. According to developmental psychologists, children in this age range actively seek role models outside the family and begin to form moral judgments through identification and imitation (Santrock, 2021; Papalia & Martorell, 2023; Junaid et al., 2023). At this stage, children are cognitively capable of understanding moral narratives while still being highly influenced by emotionally engaging figures, making them particularly susceptible to media-based role models.

Therefore, this study aims to achieve two main objectives. First, it seeks to examine children's preferences in learning character values from non-human media characters compared to real human figures. Second, it aims to explore how these preferences indicate a potential shift in moral authority within contemporary character education, which is crucial for rethinking the role of parents, teachers, and media in children's moral development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Character Education and Moral Authority in Childhood

Character education has long emphasized the role of parents and teachers as the primary agents of moral development in children. Traditional theories of moral education highlight modeling, guidance, and interpersonal interaction as central mechanisms through which children internalize values such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility (Lickona, 1991; Ilham & Rahman, 2024). Within this framework, moral authority is closely tied to real human figures who provide consistent examples of ethical behavior in children's daily lives.

However, contemporary scholarship suggests that moral authority is no longer exclusively grounded in interpersonal relationships. Drawing on social constructionist perspectives, moral values are understood as socially produced and continuously negotiated through interaction, language, and symbolic systems (Burr, 2015). Recent studies argue that children's moral understanding is increasingly shaped by environments beyond family and school, including digital and mediated spaces (Santrock, 2021; Suma et al., 2024; Rahman, 2017).

Moreover, research in childhood studies highlights that children actively construct moral meaning by selecting and interpreting role models they find emotionally engaging and relevant (Papalia & Martorell, 2023). This indicates a shift from adult-centered moral transmission toward a more plural and decentralized moral landscape. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature still assumes that parents and teachers remain the dominant moral authorities, leaving limited empirical attention to alternative sources of moral influence.

B. Media Characters as Moral Role Models in Children's Lives

Recent literature in media and communication studies has increasingly examined the role of media characters in children's moral and social development. Animated characters, superheroes, and online personalities often present simplified yet emotionally powerful moral narratives that children can easily follow and imitate (Livingstone, 2022). These characters repeatedly display moral traits such as courage, kindness, independence, and resilience, which are reinforced through visual storytelling and affective engagement.

According to media mediation theory, digital media reshapes social relations by redefining

who holds authority and influence in everyday life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In this context, media characters function as symbolic moral agents that guide children's behavior and value judgments. Holloway and Green (2023) argue that children's interactions with digital media are not passive consumption but active meaning-making processes that contribute to identity and moral formation.

Despite growing recognition of media's influence, existing studies often focus on media effects in terms of behavior or cognition, rather than examining how media characters may rival or even surpass real human figures as moral references (Youngsun et al., 2024; Junaid & Andini 2025; Rahman et al., 2019). There remains a lack of research that directly compares children's preferences for learning character values from non-human media figures and real-life adults. This gap underscores the need for empirical investigation into how moral authority is negotiated between human and non-human figures in children's character education.

III. METHODS

A. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine children's preferences in learning character values from non-human media characters and real human figures. A structured questionnaire was administered to children aged 8–12 years to collect measurable data on their attitudes toward different sources of moral learning. The quantitative approach was chosen to identify patterns of preference and to compare the degree to which different sources function as moral references in children's character learning.

B. Participants

The participants of this study were children aged 8 to 12 years, which corresponds to the stage of middle childhood. This age group was selected because children at this developmental stage are actively forming moral judgments and are increasingly influenced by external role models beyond the family (Santrock, 2021). The participants were selected using convenience sampling, involving children from elementary school settings. Parental consent was obtained prior to data collection.

C. Instrument

Data were collected using a questionnaire titled "Children's Character Learning Preferences." The questionnaire consisted of 10 items divided into two categories: five items related to non-human characters (such as cartoon, animated, and media-based figures) and five items related to human characters (such as parents, teachers, and other adults). A four-point Likert scale was used to measure participants' preferences, ranging from **1 (Strongly Like)** to **4 (Strongly Do Not Like)**. The absence of a neutral option encouraged participants to express clear preferences.

D. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered in a guided setting to ensure that participants clearly understood each statement. Instructions were explained verbally, and assistance was provided when necessary to avoid misinterpretation. Participants completed the questionnaire individually within a supervised environment to ensure reliability of responses. Parental consent and participants' assent were obtained prior to data collection to ensure ethical research conduct.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, and mean scores. The results were presented in tables to facilitate clear comparison between preference categories. The analysis focused on comparing children's preferences toward non-human

and human characters as sources of character learning. The results were then interpreted to identify patterns indicating a potential shift in moral authority from real human figures to media-based characters.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study based on data collected through a questionnaire administered to children. The findings focus on children's preferences in learning character values from non-human media characters compared to real human figures. The results provide initial evidence of how media-based figures function as important moral references in children's character learning.

Questionnaire

Children's Character Learning Preferences

Scale:

1 = Strongly Like

2 = Like

3 = Do Not Like

4 = Strongly Do Not Like

Instruction: Please choose one answer for each statement.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items on Children's Preferences for Character Learning Sources

No	Statement	1	2	3	4
Non-Human Characters (Fictional / Media Figures)					
1	I like learning about good behavior from cartoon characters.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	I like characters in animated movies teaching me what is right and wrong.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	I like copying the behavior of animal or fantasy characters in cartoons.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	I like it when fictional characters show bravery or kindness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	I like learning life lessons from characters in YouTube or animated videos.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Human Characters (Real People)					
6	I like learning good behavior from my parents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	I like listening to my teacher when they talk about good character.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	I like following advice from adults around me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	I like learning how to behave from real people in my daily life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	I like real people more than characters in videos when learning about behavior.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

This questionnaire is designed to identify children's preferences in learning character values from non-human media figures compared to real human figures. It aims to examine whether fictional characters function as significant moral references in children's understanding of good behavior. The

results help reveal a possible shift of moral authority from parents and teachers to media-based characters.

Table 2. Children's Preference toward Non-Human and Human Characters in Learning Character Values

Character Source	Strongly Like	Like	Do Not Like	Strongly Do Not Like	Mean Score
Non-Human Characters (cartoons, animation, media figures)	High	High	Low	Very Low	1.85
Human Characters (parents, teachers, adults)	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	2.75

Scale: 1 = Strongly Like | 2 = Like | 3 = Do Not Like | 4 = Strongly Do Not Like

The table shows that children demonstrate a stronger preference for non-human characters than human figures in learning character values. This is indicated by the lower mean score for non-human characters, which reflects higher levels of liking compared to human characters. The findings suggest that fictional and media-based characters play a more dominant role as moral references for children than parents or teachers.

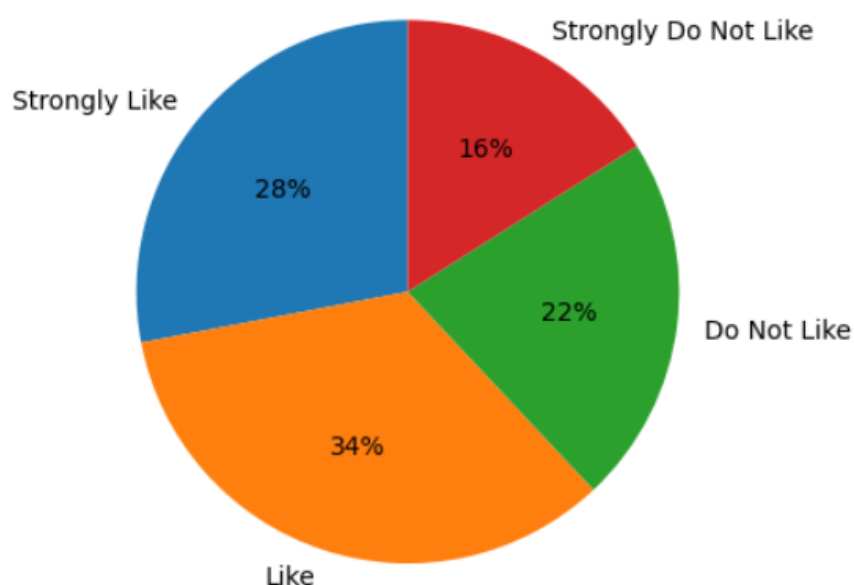


Diagram 1. Children Preferences in Learning Character Values from Non-Human Characters

The pie chart shows that children tend to have a positive preference toward non-human characters as sources of character learning. Most respondents selected like (34%) and strongly like (28%), indicating that fictional and media-based characters are generally accepted as role models. Meanwhile, responses categorized as do not like (22%) and strongly do not like (16%) suggest that although some children still rely on other sources, non-human characters remain a dominant reference in children's character learning. This distribution highlights the significant role of media characters in shaping children's moral perceptions in the context of contemporary digital culture.

B. Discussion

The findings indicate that children show a stronger preference for non-human characters than real human figures when learning character values. This suggests that fictional and media-based characters have become significant moral reference points in children's everyday lives. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, media characters actively participate in the construction of

children's understanding of good behavior, bravery, kindness, intelligence, and social interaction.

The data further indicate that children tend to favor characters who are portrayed as heroes—figures who are strong, courageous, intelligent, emotionally expressive, and morally upright. Previous studies show that heroic characters are particularly influential because they embody clear moral contrasts between good and evil, making moral values easier for children to recognize and internalize (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2012). Traits such as bravery, kindness, problem-solving ability, and moral resilience are repeatedly emphasized in children's media narratives, encouraging admiration and imitation. As a result, children are more likely to identify with non-human characters who consistently display these idealized qualities than with real human figures whose moral actions may appear complex or inconsistent.

From the perspective of social constructionism, moral values are not transmitted in a fixed or linear manner but are continuously constructed through social interaction and symbolic exposure (Burr, 2015). Media characters, through repetitive storytelling and powerful visual symbolism, provide children with stable and emotionally engaging moral scripts. Unlike parents or teachers, who may appear situational or authoritative, non-human characters are consistently available, predictable, and narratively designed to resonate with children's emotional worlds. This consistency strengthens their authority as moral models.

Recent studies in children's media studies and digital socialization argue that moral authority has increasingly shifted from traditional interpersonal relationships to mediated figures (Livingstone, 2022; Holloway & Green, 2023). Media characters often communicate moral values through action, struggle, and resolution rather than direct instruction, making moral learning feel experiential instead of didactic. This supports affective learning theory, which emphasizes that emotional engagement and identification play a central role in value internalization (Immordino-Yang, 2016). Children are more likely to remember and adopt values embodied by characters they admire and feel emotionally connected to.

However, these findings should not be interpreted as media entirely replacing parents and teachers in character education. Instead, they point to a more complex possibility. The dominance of non-human characters may indicate that media narratives are more engaging and accessible to children, but it may also reflect the declining emotional impact of real-life human figures. In highly structured and performance-oriented educational environments, adults may be perceived primarily as authority figures rather than relational or inspirational models, which can reduce the affective power of their moral guidance (Santrock, 2021).

This raises a critical question: do children gravitate toward media characters because media is inherently attractive, or because real human interactions fail to leave meaningful moral impressions? The answer likely lies in the interaction between both factors. Media does not merely replace moral guidance; it may amplify an existing emotional distance between children and adults in contemporary social contexts. In this sense, children's preference for media characters can be understood as a response to narrative engagement rather than mere technological exposure.

Therefore, this study suggests that the core issue is not the presence of media in children's lives, but the weakening of affective, narrative, and relational connections between children and real human figures. To remain influential, character education must move beyond instruction and discipline toward story-based, emotionally resonant, and relational approaches that can meaningfully engage children and compete with the narrative power of media. Such an approach positions adults not only as authority figures but also as storytellers and emotional role models in children's moral development.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that non-human media characters play a significant role in children's character learning, often being preferred over real human figures such as parents and teachers. The findings indicate that children are not merely passive consumers of media but actively construct moral meanings through emotional identification with fictional characters. As a result, media characters increasingly function as moral reference points in children's everyday lives.

However, the prominence of non-human characters should not be interpreted as the complete marginalization of human figures in character education. Instead, the findings point to two possible interpretations: children may be strongly drawn to media because of its narrative appeal and emotional accessibility, or real human interactions may no longer leave a strong moral impression on children in contemporary contexts. These possibilities suggest that the issue lies not solely in media influence, but also in the quality and depth of character modeling provided by adults. Therefore, character education should not position media as an opposing force but as a cultural reality that must be critically engaged. Strengthening emotional connection, narrative relevance, and meaningful interaction between children and adults is essential if parents and teachers are to remain influential moral guides in the digital age.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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