

## Article

# Analysis of the Narratives with Characters That Make Ethnic Diversity Visible—Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir

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**Abstract:** This study follows the line of different authors who examined the visibility of ethnic diversity in children’s television series and the psychoeducational implications of these media narratives for children. Specifically, this work analyses the behaviours/actions developed by the model characters of cultural diversity and how these characters promote a perspective on diversity that conditions children. Employing a qualitative methodology, we use content analysis and critical discourse analysis as tools to be able to read, describe and interpret said content. The results highlight that these children’s programmes present a culture that reinforces certain values and behaviours. Likewise, the TV programmes analysed present stories marked by models of cultural diversity that contribute to the maintenance of certain social structures and the normalisation of inequality. We believe that educational institutions, through media education, should go deeper and teach students to look critically, deciphering codes of the audiovisual language present in the elements of children’s stories. In the complex society of the 21st century, we must consider that the needs of children change depending on how their identity intersects with aspects such as ethnicity, class, gender, etc., in order to equip them with the appropriate tools to deal with these problems.

**Keywords:** digital narratives; cultural diversity; media literacy



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## 1. Introduction

Taking the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a reference, to guarantee an inclusive education system, the application of policies and actions that take into account the differences and needs of students is needed. Thus, we work for an education that promotes intercultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity, which are vital pillars for cohesion and social justice. In this sense, children’s television series are part of the ecologies of childhood learning that, through their audiovisual narratives, intervene in the learning process [1].

In addition to this statement, the fact that television provides content for peer play [2,3], as well as the basis for the production of toys and video games [4], is also relevant. To such a degree, programmes are products that enable interaction and the creation and reproduction of narratives.

Different authors [5,6] establish that the media representations observed in the early stages of child development are crucial, since in these stages, infants choose models to follow according to their own sociocultural identity. These representations offer information about who can play certain roles in society [5].

In such a manner, some narratives make identification possible and favour feelings of cultural belonging, which happens by relating children’s own experiences with the circumstances and situations in which the main character lives (sentimental grief, migrations, or life changes) [7]. This happens even more so with the adherence of technology to the stories because it facilitates the introduction of media representations in different spaces;

thus, the audience feels connected to the images that awaken past experiences and have an impact on the sought identity [8].

From this perspective, it is possible to understand the great influence that media narratives have in the process of development of children's identity. The influence of media narratives is especially in infants who experience of migration, since this is a vital moment that affects their personal identity.

In this regard, Bird [9] explains that the way in which the media represents the community to which we belong affects our identity. For this reason, it has become of fundamental interest to know and intervene in regard to the influence that media narratives have on childhood, since the meanings, ideas, values, and roles that are transmitted through stories serve as guidelines or examples within the construction of identity [10–12].

Hence, analysing the models of cultural diversity that are reproduced in children's media narratives is increasingly important in today's multicultural society. This approach is a medium that offers the possibility of recognizing one's own identity and empathizing with groups other than one's own.

Johnson [13] warns that children's productions that promote neo-colonial ideologies, such as Disney, can influence how future generations interact and coexist within communities of colour. Based on the impact of these products, Clark [14] advises families to mediate and intervene in the choice of audiovisual content that their children consume.

Despite the advances in recent research [15–17], representations of the white race and the middle class predominate in children's television. These media narratives promote the idea that this is the normal childhood to which viewers should aspire [17]. In particular, Sánchez-Labela Martín [18], in her exploration of children's cartoons in Spain, finds that the representation of cultural diversity is stereotyped and does not promote social coexistence based on respect.

For their part, Hamlen and Imbesi [5] found that most television programmes for pre-schoolers in the US present muppets/puppets as a way to prevent this type of problem. However, the rest of children's programming continues with a low representation of ethnic diversity, especially as main characters and in programmes with educational subjects such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and problem solving.

Although television content can reinforce negative attitudes [19] and be a source of stereotyped information, it can also offer quality programming that counteracts said information and promotes social inclusion [20]. In this sense, television as an educational resource not only helps the appropriation of information and skills, but also allows the development of pro-social behaviours that include reducing the prevalence of negative stereotypes [21].

In this regard, Yoo [22] presents Sesame Street as an example of an educational programme that tries to teach about ethnic diversity and discrimination in the US. However, this author believes that the programme should use Critical Race Theory to analyse how children are educated on issues of race, since passive representation and active discussion is not enough.

Considering the influence of media narratives, the following research questions are posed: what behaviours and actions are developed by the characters that function as models of cultural diversity? and how can this image condition the way in which social and cultural diversity is viewed?

Thus, the objectives that guide this work are specified as follows: objective 1 is to analyse the behaviours and actions developed by the model characters of cultural diversity, while Objective 2 is to determine how these images promote a way of looking at diversity that conditions, being a way of approaching the construction of the image of ethnic diversity in children's television programmes.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study has a qualitative and social orientation, for which reason techniques are used to critically describe and interpret it. For this reason, Content Analysis and Critical

Discourse Analysis [23] are used as methodologies since they allow the identification, description, interpretation, and analysis of the models of cultural diversity present in the audiovisual narrative of the chosen children's series.

The method of critical discourse analysis studies the way in which dominance, inequalities and the abuse of power are reproduced through written texts and mediative narratives in different social contexts, in turn collaborating effectively in resistance against social injustices [23].

As Van Dijk says, this allows the understanding and critical analysis of television content, as well as the possible modification of beliefs, perceptions and behaviours where there may be an abuse of power, since this method not only tries to expose or describe domination, but also takes a position active criticism.

Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir (Ladybug) is selected because it stands out as one of the most popular children's series, according to the latest report from the Association for Communication Media Research, AIMC Niños 2018 [24], in addition to being an audiovisual production financed by the Creative Europe programme. Specifically, the MEDIA subprogramme seeks to promote and distribute European media content, preserving its cultural and linguistic diversity [25].

This series is produced by Method Animation and Zag Entertainment, in collaboration with De Agostini Editore, Toei Animation and SAMG Animation. According to De Miguel Sanz [26], the creator of this animation, Thomas Astruc, was inspired by the drawings of Sailor Moon (Japanese), Spider-Man (American) and Amélie Poulain (French–Belgian). Its production began in 2015 and it is still currently broadcast; each episode lasts approximately 25 min. The objective of the creator and director (Thomas Astruc) was to produce a television series that would show the beauty of France and include superheroes and action elements that would captivate the young audience, especially the female audience.

To approach the analysis of this TV series, an exploration of the 121 episodes that constitute the 5 seasons currently broadcast was carried out. At this stage, as a way of performing a microanalysis that allows us to work each chapter as a unit of analysis [27], 2 episodes were randomly selected using the Random Generator App, which is freely accessible on Google Play. This application showed the following numbers as result: episodes 57, known as Boulangerix, and 107, known as Destruction; the episodes constituted a total of 44 min and 10 s out of a total of 44 h viewed.

Regarding the collection of information, we used a tool designed for the analysis of cultural diversity in children's series [28], which takes as a reference the works of Sánchez-Labela [29], Cantillo-Valero [30] and Propp [31]. On that account, it focuses on the development of the stories and the holistic construction of the characters from a gender perspective. Therefore, the final product is a material that allows the analysis of both the story and the characters, while at the same time facilitating the systematisation of information. This instrument takes into account the following categories: the denomination, the role, the physical description of the characters and the problem–resolution in which the character intervenes.

In this way, in the analysis procedure, this tool allows us to focus attention on the physical, sociological and psychological dimensions of the characters. Thus, the values, stereotypes and ideas, with which the coloured characters that function as models of cultural diversity are constructed, are identified. In such a manner, it can capture the behaviours and actions of each character and reflect on the way of looking at the diversity that is promoted. Aspects are collected in Tables 1 and 2, in which the analysis of results is shown.

**Table 1.** Analysis of characters of episode number 57.

Dimensions	Main Character	Secondary Character
Denomination	Marinette/Ladybug	Rolland, Marinette's grandfather/baker (villain)
Role	The heroine	Villain
Description	Mixed race girl. Sweet, creative, kind and responsible girl.	White man. Stubborn, traditional and obstinate person. Bewitched, he becomes a Viking, highlighting the Nordic figure and his lineage, as he had previously commented.
Problems and resolution of episode 57	P: Convincing her grandfather to celebrate her father's birthday. R: At first, she unsuccessfully tries to convince her grandfather to reconcile with her father. After saving her grandpa from the spell, she encourages him to appreciate new ways of doing things.	P: Marinette's grandfather refuses to recognise her as his granddaughter, claiming that his son should not change the traditional recipes. R: He accept that Marinette is not a traditional granddaughter and learns to like her.

**Table 2.** Analysis of characters of episode number 107.

Dimensions	Main Character	Secondary Character
Denomination	Marinette/Ladybug	Alya/Marinette's best friend
Role	The heroine	Sidekid/ Marinette's moral support
Description	Mixed race girl. Sweet, creative, kind and responsible girl.	Black girl. Encouraging, caring, thoughtful, good friend, and optimistic girl.
Problems and resolution of episode 107	P: Hawk Moth breaks into Marinette's room to force her to give up Ladybug's address. R: Ladybug/Marinette had prepared a plan to confuse the Hawk Moth and set a trap for it. Marinette manages to safeguard her identity, but not definitively defeat the villain.	P: Hawk Moth interrupts Alya and Marinette's sleepover to force them to divulge the heroine's address. R: Alya refuses to give in to the villain, hiding Ladybug's identity. She cares for and protects Marinette.

### 3. Results

This study takes as a reference the current multicultural society in which we are immersed and the importance of recognizing all identities. In this case, the analysis is focused on the visibility of ethnic diversity in the selected children's television episodes and the psychoeducational implications that these media narratives have on childhood. This paper analyses the behaviours/actions developed by the model characters of cultural diversity and how they promote a way of looking at the diversity that conditions.

The results are presented in two sections: descriptive and interpretive sections. In the descriptive phase, the summary of the episode and the observations obtained on the physical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of the coloured characters are explained. Conversely, in the interpretative analysis, we reflect on the behaviours and models of cultural diversity that are reproduced, considering the perspectives of different authors.

#### 3.1. Descriptive Analysis

The Ladybug series is articulated through stories of the adventures of a duo of superheroes in the city of Paris, France. Marinette and Adrien are teenagers who, with their pseudo-hero identities, fight against the negative force of the Moth, protecting the city from its spells.

Episode 57, known as Boulangerix/The Baker (ES), is about how Marinette tries to reconnect her father and grandfather's relationship. The latter is bewitched in the form of a Viking, presented a villain who promises to punish those who refuse to complete tasks as they should be completed, i.e., in a traditional manner. Similarly, in episode number 107,

known as Destruction/Destruction (ES), it is shown that the villain Moth tries to find the direction of the superheroes, and how Ladybug must use her wits to face the challenge.

Tables 1 and 2 present a comparison between the main and secondary characters of each episode, describing each subject based on their name, role, and the development of the problem/resolution.

Based on the evidence collected, the behaviours of the main and secondary characters are analysed, interpreting the models of cultural diversity that are proposed based on the roles they occupy and the qualities that are conferred on them, as well as their intervention in the resolution of problems and conflicts that constitute each story.

### 3.2. Interpretive Analysis

The results show that the Ladybug series, through its main and secondary characters that function as models of ethnic diversity, makes visible new representations of subjects that break with certain gender and cultural stereotypes.

On one hand, there is the main character, named Marinette, who is a brave heroine who fights to protect her city. Another example is the character of Alya, who is brave and daring in the face of the threat of villains. In this way, this programme continues with the line of modern animations where the female characters play a heroic role [32,33].

Therefore, it can be established that this series uses different characters of colour as a way of representing the cultural diversity that exists in society. These characters break with heteronormative patterns and cultural assumptions, showing different ways of existing. Thus, new models of heroes are made visible in order to break with certain gender and cultural stereotypes.

On the other hand, it is observed some characters of colour act in a stereotyped way. Such is the case of the secondary character, named Alya, who occupies the role of a best friend who cares and gives moral support to the main character. In fact, throughout the episode, she is seen performing service tasks for Marinette. Authors such as Glenn and Cunningham [34] explain that these representations have evolved from archaic stereotypes, such as the magical negro or mummies, which are characters whose sole purpose is to assist the white character.

The series in question, by presenting media narratives in which characters of colour repeat conventional representations, such as carrying out behaviours and actions of service, promotes images designed to preserve certain social structures of gender, social class and race [18,35].

Gruzinski [36] calls this phenomenon the cultural battle of images, since, in these stories, one can find images that respond to the social demands of the moment, as well as conventional representations that favour the maintenance of a social order.

Likewise, this concept can specifically be seen in episode number 57, known as The Baker, in regard to the secondary character Rolland (Marinette's grandfather), who refuses to recognise her as his granddaughter, claiming that his son should not change the traditional recipes by adding flour rice in his bread preparation. In the same sequence, a photo of the wedding of Marinette's parents is shown, showing that the grandfather was not present at the celebration, making a connection between the idea of a biracial marriage as not traditional and the fact that adding rice flour to the recipe for French bread is not conventional.

From an educational perspective, it could be understood that this episode turns out to be positive in regard to questioning the traditional vision of the family and society. In this regard, as Dorfman and Mattelart [37] explain, animated stories can serve as a didactic resource that promotes images and narratives that help to question current social interactions. In this sense, the study of these type of narratives in the Infant/kindergarten classroom and, in some way, in the Primary classroom can favour the critical viewing of media narratives, the acceptance of other realities and the disarticulation of the superiority of one group over the other [38].

However, it should not pass unnoticed the fact that, in this story, the responsibility for changing people's perceptions and stereotypes remains in the hands of people of colour, thus relegating the responsibility for each person to learn and adapt to the changing times by accepting that we live in a multicultural and changing society [39].

Therefore, this narrative presents the idea that communities of colour are the ones in charge of fighting for change and doing much of the work, instead of it being a common project in which everyone has to participate and contribute to breaking down the sociocultural prejudices that limit society.

In addition, it is considered that this way of representing cultural diversity promotes a perception of maturity in children of colour, making them visible as less innocent and more mature or even adult-like [40]. These narratives have the power to shape the identity of boys and girls of colour, as well as affect the perception that their peers have of these different communities [41–45], and can contribute to reinforcing negative ideas, such as that children of colour need less help and protection [40].

The results obtained highlight and reaffirm the idea that children's programmes present a culture that reinforces certain values and behaviours. Likewise, the analysed series presents stories marked by models of cultural diversity that contribute to the maintenance of certain social structures and the naturalisation of inequality, in turn showing new realities.

#### 4. Conclusions

It is considered that educational institutions, through media literacy, should teach students to look critically at media images, deciphering audiovisual language codes present in the elements of children's stories. As seen in the results, these narratives have a lot of influence on children, and it is not necessary to transmit values and ideas connected to the inclusive education, which is desirable according to the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

In the complex society of the 21st century, it must be taken into account that the needs of infants change depending on how their identity is inter-related with aspects such as ethnicity, class, gender, etc. [46,47], in order to provide them with the appropriate tools to deal with representation, discourse and reproduction problems.

Responding to objective 1, to analyse the behaviours and actions developed by the characters' models of cultural diversity, we considered the visibility of new representations of subjects that break with certain gender and cultural stereotypes. However, it is observed that characters of colour also repeat old representations, where they carry out behaviours and actions of service, promoting images designed to preserve certain social structures of gender, social class and race [18,35].

In this regard, it is considered that the models of cultural diversity present in the Ladybug series operate as educational instruments that can benefit the assimilation of different groups and realities [48], and, at the same time, maintain an idea of an Anglo-Saxon heteronormative society. On one hand, these media narratives can benefit the promotion of discourses of inclusion and acceptance of the diversity of identities [49–53]. On the other hand, these stories can transmit values, meanings, ideas and roles that can negatively impact the construction of identity [10–12] and serve as guidelines or examples of how to interact with other communities and what to expect from them.

Regarding objective 2, to determine how these images promote a way of looking at the diversity that conditions children, it is verified that although these narratives can favour the critical examination of media narratives, the acceptance of other realities and the disarticulation of the superiority of one over another remains an issue [38]. These media images can also contribute to reinforcing ideas that boys and girls of colour need less help and protection [40], since as they are perceived more mature and responsible.

This situation occurs because these representations offer information about what can be expected from others and who can play certain roles in the world [5,6]. The audience that watches this TV show is in an early stage of child development, where they begin choosing models to follow according to their own sociocultural identity [5]. Different authors [41–45] point out that these media narratives can have positive and negative aspects, as these



stories have the power to shape identity and specifically influence the construction of the social imagery.

In this fashion, Sánchez-Labela Martín [54] explains that due to globalisation, identical children's programming is being consumed in different parts of the world, which encourages the homogenisation of behaviours. From this perspective, the influence of children's audiovisual productions can cause a standardisation of values, perceptions and social imaginaries.

As already established, although television content can reinforce negative attitudes [19] and be a source of stereotyped information, it can also offer quality programming that counteracts said information and promotes social inclusion [20]. In this sense, television as an educational resource not only helps the appropriation of information and skills, but also allows the development of pro-social behaviours that include reducing prevalence of negative stereotypes [21].

Therefore, following international regulations [55,56] that establish the right of children to access television programming that reduces stereotypes and favours social inclusion by showing and celebrating social and cultural diversity, it is a social responsibility to critically explore and examine children's media products, as well as promote narratives that favour an inclusive vision of society.

From a human rights perspective, the duty to care for children in every aspect of their development is established. However, the results show that from a legal perspective, the rights of children could be violated, since through media content they are manipulated and treated as simple consumers.

Thus, it is recognised that media literacy plays a very important role in the education of citizens through reducing the influence of the media and the reproduction of stereotypes [57,58]. Consequently, it is understood that critical education about the media is an adequate tool to work on resilience and social inclusion [59], thus facilitating the scope of an inclusive education that celebrates and respects diversity in all its forms at home and in the classroom [60–62].

Likewise, it is contemplated that as education professionals, under an inclusion approach, we must take into account that the needs of infants change depending on how their identity intersects with aspects such as ethnicity, class, gender, etc. Therefore, students can be provided with the appropriate tools to deal with problems of discourse, representation and reproduction. In addition, to be able to address and work on issues such as migratory grief and resilience, we require open spaces for dialogue that help improve the school environment in terms of inclusion.

Similar to the different authors mentioned before, it is of interest to highlight the importance of the participation of families and teachers in the selection of audiovisual products that children consume both outside and inside the classroom. It would also be of interest to introduce analysis of television series, such as the series studied, as a didactic resource in the classroom. In this sense, Sobande [63] explains, through his study on parental management and the use of media, that there is a need for producers and creators of media content to be sensitive to the concerns of families and society. Furthermore, families should be encouraged to participate and accompany their children in the selection and monitoring of their favourite TV series, being involved in the reinterpretation of worldviews presented in an autonomous and responsible way.

At this point, we return to the questions posed in the introduction: what behaviours and actions are developed by the characters that function as models of cultural diversity? and how can this image condition the way in which social and cultural diversity is viewed? After the analysis was carried out, we concluded that new models of subjects that break with certain gender and cultural stereotypes were made visible, presenting behaviours that are consistent with the popular feminist aesthetic that exists in narratives for adolescents and adults. However, it is observed that the coloured characters repeat conventional representations, where they carry out behaviours and actions of service, promoting images designed to preserve certain social structures of gender, class, and race.

Therefore, the incidence of TV series on identity must continue to be investigated, along with how it is redefined among the young generations. To give continuity to this work, it would be relevant to design a field study for different Early Childhood education classrooms, and watch an episode of the Ladybug series with the children. After viewing, it would be a matter of observing the interaction process created in each group-class, while the researchers/teachers would record the dialogues, themes and comments that arise from the infants to incorporate them as new content analysis categories for the series.

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