

Cultural Identity and Ideology in Children's Media: A Comparative Analysis of Caillou and Nasreddin Hoca

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Abstract

This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the role of children's media in the construction of cultural and economic identity through two characters: *Caillou*, a Canadian production, and *Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu*, a Turkish production. Based on the premise that media serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a significant medium for the transmission of ideological and cultural codes, the study establishes a theoretical framework grounded in the concepts of representation, semiotics, cultural capital, and simulation theory. The significance of this research lies in its examination of how media content shapes children's value systems, perceptions of identity, and understanding of social roles within a cultural context. The findings suggest that while the character of *Caillou* reflects individualism and consumer culture, *Nasreddin Hoca* foregrounds collectivist values, historical consciousness, and representations of local culture. Within this framework, the study reveals that media content exerts a profound and formative influence on children's cognitive, cultural, and social development. Especially during early childhood, media functions as a key source in shaping children's symbolic world. Therefore, the production of media content that reflects cultural diversity, promotes critical thinking, and supports multidimensional identity development is of vital importance. This study also aims to raise awareness among families, educators, and media producers in the context of media literacy.

Keywords: Children's Media, Cultural Identity, Semiotics, Caillou, Nasreddin Hoca

Introduction

In today's world, television and digital media platforms stand at the forefront of mass communication tools that define the era we live in, serving as the most effective and widespread instruments of cultural production. In developed countries, television is increasingly seen as a key source of information, with its importance in information dissemination growing day by day. As Fiske (1995: 45) states, "Television is part of the movement that realizes social change and constructs ideological values." Media has transcended its role as a mere provider of information and entertainment, becoming a powerful space of socialization where ideological, cultural, and economic codes are conveyed, especially to children.

Among mass media tools, television plays a central role in shaping children's social and cultural identities. Preschool-aged children are capable of identifying with animated characters (Oruç, Tecim & Özyürek, 2011). Especially during early childhood, the programs they watch act as decisive agents in identity formation, and the characters, settings, and narratives presented in media content directly influence how children perceive and understand the world.

The concept of "identity construction" refers to the process through which individuals build and shape their identities, including how they see themselves, how they are perceived by others, and how they position themselves within social contexts. Research has shown that identity is not an innate or purely individual characteristic, but rather a product of social environments. Individuals tend to construct their identities in relation to the characteristics of the social settings they find themselves in (Zhao et al., 2008: 1831).

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of how children acquire economic and cultural identities through media content by examining two children's characters produced in different cultural contexts: the Canadian character *Caillou* and the Turkish character *Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu*. While *Caillou* presents a modern representation that focuses on the construction of a consumer identity, reflecting Western-centric individualism and consumer culture (Eşitti, 2016: 127), *Nasreddin Hoca* serves as a vehicle for transmitting traditional values, cultural codes, and social norms, representing collectivist culture (Avcı, C. 2020: 559).

This study aims to offer a multi-layered analytical perspective situated at the intersection of cultural studies and media theories. It draws upon Stuart Hall's theory of representation (2017), Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis (2016a), Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (2015), and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation (2014)



as its theoretical framework. As Hall (2005a: 104–105) argues, media content does not merely transmit messages; it also creates a space of ideological negotiation through the ways in which these messages are interpreted. This analysis seeks to deconstruct the discursive structures and cultural codes communicated by both characters. In this context, the study focuses on two key research questions:

1. How are economic and cultural identity representations conveyed to children in the programs *Caillou* and *Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu*? What kinds of representations are developed in *Caillou* regarding the construction of a child consumer identity?

2. What cultural values and ideological orientations are emphasized in these representational forms? How is cultural identity constructed and language used in *Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu*?

The significance of this research lies in its focus on media's impact on children not only at the behavioral level but also in terms of cultural identity formation. According to Koç (2006:226), referencing Bandura, cartoon characters have become prominent models in children's learning processes. Fictional characters are often more influential than real ones (Bandura, 1963: 3-11). Considering that a significant portion of the symbolic resources children use to make sense of the world are presented through media, the structural and semiotic analysis of children's programs becomes imperative.

The limitations of this study are that it focuses solely on specific programs in which the two characters are represented and analyzes selected scenes. Furthermore, the analysis is confined to visual and narrative elements, excluding empirical audience-based data on how children perceive these contents. Nevertheless, it is believed that a textual-level analysis of representation can make a valuable contribution to understanding the ideological structure of media content.

The research employs both semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis as its methodology. This dual approach aims to reveal how individual consumption practices are legitimized through media, and how traditional values are symbolized. Based on the assumption that characters in children's programs are not merely entertainment elements but also media actors involved in the construction of children's cultural identities and consumer consciousness, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, ideological, and economic impacts of media content on children's identity development.

2.Theoretical Framework

2.1. Stuart Hall - Theory of Representation and Meaning-Making in the Media

Stuart Hall's theory of representation argues that media content does not merely reflect reality; rather, it reconstructs reality through cultural and ideological codes. According to Hall (2005b: 104-105), representation is a process in which objects, people, and events are re-produced within specific linguistic or visual systems. In this process, the media presents various aspects of social life from a particular perspective, thereby guiding the audience in the production of meaning.

The process of meaning-making depends on the representation of things through language (Gökgül, 2022: 66). Hall bases the relationship between culture, language, and representation on the idea that culture is fundamentally concerned with "shared meanings." Therefore, language is essential to meaning and culture; it is always seen as a primary source of cultural values and meanings. Hall links the meaning-generating capacity of language to its function as a representational system. Language is one of the "tools" through which thoughts, ideas, and emotions are represented within a culture whether through sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, or even objects (Hall, 2017: 7). By discussing three different theories on how language is used to represent the world, Hall seeks to explore how the concept of representation enables the relationship between meaning and culture through language (Hall, 2017: 35–36).

Among these theoretical approaches, Hall is known to primarily adopt the "constructivist approach." It is significant to note that this approach plays a key role in the development of his renowned encoding/decoding model. Situated firmly within the critical paradigm, the encoding/decoding model offers a new perspective on the audience's position by challenging the notion that audiences are passive recipients of media messages (Turner, 2016: 107–108).

Children's television and digital media content carry significant ideological functions within this representational process. When considered in the context of Hall's encoding/decoding model (2017: 7), the characters and narratives presented in children's programming become structures through which particular value systems and lifestyles are encoded. For instance, *Caillou* represents the core elements of Western modernity, such as individual rights, freedom, and the capacity for personal choice. In contrast, *Nasreddin Hoca: The Time Traveler* offers a representational strategy rooted in traditional values, collective memory, and historical continuity. In this context,



representation is not merely the transmission of an image, but also the determinant of the ideological framework within which that image acquires meaning. In line with Hall's perspective, children, while learning to perceive the world through media, are simultaneously guided toward specific identity constructs.

2.2. Roland Barthes – Semiotic Analysis

Roland Barthes's semiotic theory offers a powerful framework for analyzing the multilayered processes of meaning production in cultural products particularly in media content. Barthes (1979: 88) conceptualizes signs on two levels: the denotative level, which refers to the literal or primary meaning of a sign; and the connotative level, which encompasses the secondary meanings attributed to that sign within a specific cultural context. As Barthes moved from linguistic analysis to semiotic analysis, he employed signifying systems such as denotation, connotation, and metalanguage. Each of these meaning systems is composed of a signifier (expression) and a signified (content). The first order of signification consisting of the signifier, the signified, and the sign yields denotation. Denotation occupies the primary position in the hierarchy of meaning and refers to the immediately perceptible content. The connotative level, in turn, takes the sign from the first order and repurposes it as a signifier in a new system of meaning.

Visual elements in children's programming such as character designs, setting choices, and use of color extend beyond simply presenting information. These elements carry codes that idealize specific lifestyles. For example, the home environment depicted in *Caillou* is presented as simple and safe; yet, simultaneously, it functions as a symbol of middle-class domestic life. In this context, children are not merely watching the daily routines of a character, but are also subtly encouraged to perceive that lifestyle as "natural" and "desirable." In contrast, *Nasreddin Hoca: The Time Traveler*, through its portrayal of traditional clothing, historical cityscapes, and oral narrative structures, symbolically reconstructs cultural memory.

In Barthes's framework, such signs do not merely reflect the past; they also serve as ideological propositions that shape how today's children are expected to see and interpret the past. In *Mythologies*, Barthes presents a model for decoding ideologies embedded in cultural forms. As Gottdiener (2005: 32) explains, "All ideologies are also hierarchical symbolic systems that code both objects and socially privileged practices within a system of prestige relations." Therefore, Barthes's concept enables a renewed examination of the relationship between ideology and cultural distinctions.

In this study, the selected media samples will be analyzed using Roland Barthes's (1979) semiotic model. Characters, colors, settings, and discourses employed in the programs will be treated as meaningful sign systems and examined accordingly.

2.3.Pierre Bourdieu – Cultural Capital and Symbolic Violence

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the role of children's media in reproducing class-based and cultural inequalities. Bourdieu defines cultural capital in relation to symbolic resources such as a person's level of education, language use, aesthetic preferences and patterns of behavior. According to Bourdieu, capital is described as a form of energy used within social and cultural relations. The concepts of capital and field are closely connected. Social relations within fields such as education, religion and modes of speech are contexts in which capital is reproduced and circulated through exchange processes (Göker, 2014: 278).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is particularly useful for explaining the media's power to legitimize certain lifestyles. When some ways of life are presented by the media as natural, correct or ideal, while other lifestyles are implicitly excluded, this reflects the reproduction of symbolic violence through media.

In his book *On Television*, Bourdieu clarifies one dimension of symbolic violence. Appearing on a television program often means giving up one's autonomy. This loss of autonomy can involve restrictions on speaking time, limitations on the subject matter and the imposition of specific topics. In this way, television becomes a mechanism that enables and sustains symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1997: 21). Media content encodes which forms of capital are considered valuable, shaping children according to certain social norms.

2.4. Jean Baudrillard - Simulation Theory and the Transformation of Reality in Media

Baudrillard emphasizes that consumption is not merely an individual act but an active social behavior, a form of coercion, a moral system, and an institution. He argues that consumption functions as a social value system that integrates and regulates individuals, playing a significant role in the formation of personality and identity (Baudrillard, 2014: 95). From Baudrillard's perspective, simulation corresponds to hyperreality, where reality is produced through models without an original or base reality. Simulation short-circuits reality by reproducing it



through signs (Turan, 2011: 171). Simply put, simulation is the act of presenting something that does not exist as if it were real (Adamr, 2008: 13).

Jean Baudrillard's simulation theory explains how, in the media age, reality transforms into spectacle and how copies of reality replace reality itself. According to Baudrillard, in the postmodern media environment, the boundary between the real and its representation becomes blurred; media content ceases to be a mere representation of reality and instead creates hyperrealities that replace it (Hollinger, 2005: 197).

The episodes of Caillou, which always end positively, along with its sterile living conditions and controlled social interactions, present an idealized simulation of childhood. The challenges, contradictions, and conflicts of real life are almost entirely absent from this content. In this sense, the program offers children a "model reality" that is difficult to attain.

Similarly, Nasreddin Hoca: The Time Traveler does not reflect historical reality exactly but rather constructs a nostalgic and mythological past. In this program, the past becomes a tool that legitimizes contemporary values, and cultural identities are reproduced through a simulated history. Baudrillard's theory serves as a critical framework for understanding how these alternative realities produced by media take shape in the minds of children.

3. Methodology

This study is structured using a qualitative research approach aimed at understanding the cultural, ideological, and economic representations in media content targeted at children (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011). The methodology combines media ethnographic perspectives with semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis (Şah, 2020: 220-222).

The primary rationale for choosing a qualitative analysis method lies in the fact that media content directed at children encompasses multilayered structures not only at the content level but also in terms of reproducing social structures, transmitting cultural norms, and processes of identity formation. Within this framework, the study aims to analyze the meanings carried by visual and narrative elements from the perspective of cultural studies.

3.1. Theoretical and Methodological Foundation

The analytical methods employed in this study are as follows:

Semiotic analysis: Within the framework of Roland Barthes' (1979) two-level theory of meaning, visuals and discourses were analyzed at both the denotative (literal meaning) and connotative (cultural/ideological meaning) levels.

Discourse analysis: Following Stuart Hall's (2005b) theory of representation, media discourses were evaluated as ideological processes of meaning production.

Cultural capital and simulation approaches: Based on Pierre Bourdieu's (1997) conceptualization of cultural capital and Jean Baudrillard's (2014) theory of simulation, the cultural codes carried by the programs and the idealized media realities were discussed. This methodological framework is supported by both international literature and Turkish academic studies.

3.2. Semiotic Analysis Process

The analysis was conducted in three main stages:

Descriptive Coding: Scenes, characters, color usage, spatial arrangements, and objects in the programs were descriptively coded (for example, Caillou's room, Nasreddin Hoca's costume).

Structural Coding: The place and function of these elements within the narrative coherence were analyzed. Each element's representation of cultural practices or ideological orientations was examined.

Ideological Coding: Visual and discursive elements were interpreted within the frameworks of Bourdieu's cultural capital and Baudrillard's simulation theories to reveal the socio-cultural contexts of the represented identities.

These stages enabled an in-depth analysis of the programs not only as content but also in terms of the meaning systems they carry.

3.3. Sample

In this study, a total of 20 episodes featuring two selected children's characters were examined using purposive sampling. The selected samples are as follows:



Caillou (PBS Kids / WildBrain - YouTube): From the 2022–2023 broadcast period, 10 episodes between the 1st and 10th episodes were viewed, and 5 episodes were analyzed. Themes such as consumption practices, individualism, and family interactions were prioritized(İşman et al., 2016; Kavut, 2018).

Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu (TRT Çocuk, Turkey): From the 2021–2022 period, 10 episodes between the 1st and 10th episodes were viewed, and 5 episodes were analyzed. Scenes were selected based on historical memory, collective values, and indigenous cultural symbols (Türkman, 2008).

The episodes included in the analysis were subjected to scene-based thematic coding supported by visual analysis. The coding process enabled a structured examination of the economic and cultural identity representations presented in the media content (Şimşek and Şeker, 2012: 112). Furthermore, the combined use of Turkish and international literature allowed for greater theoretical diversity and a broader perspective on cultural contexts.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section of the study, the ways in which economic and cultural identity representations presented to children in the programs Caillou and Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu are constructed have been analyzed through direct quotations from scenes and the language use of the characters.

The analyzed scenes related to the Caillou character were obtained from episodes (2022–2023) published on WildBrain's official YouTube channel (2023). The animated series Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu was viewed and analyzed via the TRT Çocuk platform (2019). It is noted that the series has been ongoing since 2019 and first aired on June 4, 2019.



Picture 1: Caillou

Picture 2: Nasreddin Hoca

4.1. Construction of the Individual Consumer Identity and Discourse Analysis in Caillou

When the findings are analyzed, it becomes evident that the character of Caillou is represented through themes of individualism, freedom, and consumer-oriented identity aimed at children. In the analyzed episodes, Caillou frequently emphasizes his personal desires in everyday conversations and openly expresses his needs.

For example, in Episode 3 titled *Caillou Doesn't Like Vegetables*, Caillou responds to his mother by saying, "I don't like vegetables; I want chocolate cookies." These lines directly convey the theme of freedom in connection with the construction of a consumer identity to the child audience.

In Episode 4 titled *Games to play*, Caillou plays a memory game with his grandmother's friend, Mrs. Murphy. She says, "I have a special deck of cards I use when my grandson visits. This game is called the memory game." When Caillou wins the game, Mrs. Murphy adds, "Whenever my grandson wins, I always give him one of these," and gives Caillou a piece of candy. This exchange reflects how individual demand and consumer identity are reinforced at an early age.

In Episode 5, titled *Caillou and His New Shoes*, Caillou's mother says, "Your feet no longer fit into your shoes. Let's go buy new ones right away." Caillou replies, "I want shoes like Sara's." These expressions highlight Caillou's use of simple and emotionally direct language. His ability to clearly articulate his desires and needs supports the development of a sense of "rights" and "entitlement" in the child viewer. Such discourse illustrates how consumer identity and social comparison are internalized from an early age.



In Episode 6, titled *Caillou at the Beach*, the structure of language and discourse emphasizes Caillou's right to self-expression. Family members are usually portrayed as responding to his requests gently and supportively. For example, his mother says, "We'll come back tomorrow to build another castle." This statement shows how individual freedom and a child-centered perspective are reflected in the media content.

In Episode 7, titled *Caillou at Daycare*, it is narrated that "Caillou was having so much fun playing that he didn't even hear his parents calling him." This type of narration reinforces the idea that toys or personal belongings function as tools for happiness and social acceptance.

4.2. Construction of Cultural Identity and Language Use in Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu

In the animated series *Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu*, Nasreddin Hoca does not speak from the past; instead, he enters the present and continues his roles as a humorist, moral teacher, advisor, and social critic. He performs these roles within the physical settings, social issues, and cultural conditions of contemporary life (Avc1, 2020, p. 565). For instance, in Episode 1 titled *Nasreddin Hoca on the Trail*, Hoca says: "Look at those mountains and hills, how beautifully the sheep and lambs are running, I miss the smell of fresh grass and the sound of bleating it reminds me of my homeland." These lines directly convey social and cultural values to children through narrative.

In Episode 2, titled *The Lion Tamer*, Nasreddin Hoca speaks to children at a zoo and says: "Unbelievable! What's a lion doing in the middle of the city? They've caged the monkeys too... Since when do lions belong in cages? Look at these modern folks they put animals in cages, cages in forests, and leave themselves stuck in the middle of noise and chaos." These statements use humor to deliver moral lessons directly to young viewers.

The character of Nasreddin Hoca is built around a discourse structure that emphasizes social solidarity, wisdom, and traditional values. In Episode 8, titled *Lost*, he remarks: "If this were back home, we'd have found it in two steps how are we supposed to find a donkey in this huge city?" This line conveys themes of communal living and cooperation directly to children. Nasreddin Hoca's style of speaking is witty, rich in humor, and often includes repeated formulas, helping children both enjoy and learn from his speech.

For example, in Episode 9 titled Nasreddin Hoca's Lost Treasure, the following dialogue takes place:

Nasreddin Hoca: "Your pot died..."

Neighbor: "What are you saying, Hoca? Pots don't die!"

Nasreddin Hoca: "You believed the pot could give birth, but not that it could die?"

These lines directly transmit traditional folk tales to children in a playful, memorable manner.

In Episode 10, also titled *The Lion Tamer*, Nasreddin Hoca's speech remains educational and guiding. He encourages listeners to reflect, be patient, and embrace cooperation: "Since I'm part of this game, I must save Kerim." This line represents the construction of collective identity and conveys the theme

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has explored how children's media constructs representations of economic and cultural identity models by analyzing the characters *Caillou* and *Nasreddin Hoca Zaman Yolcusu*. The analyses reveal that *Caillou* symbolizes Western-centered individualism, consumer culture, and the values of personal freedom, whereas *Nasreddin Hoca* embodies collectivist cultural norms, historical consciousness, and communal solidarity. These findings align with previous studies that highlight how cultural representations are coded and transmitted to children through media, particularly along the individualism–collectivism axis (Avc1, 2020; Türkmen, 2008; Yıldız, 2018). The differing linguistic and discursive practices employed in the two programs mediate the internalization and learning of cultural identity models through media exposure (Yılar & Kakşa, 2020: 534).

The data shows that *Nasreddin Hoca* uses a narrative structure enriched with proverbs, wisdom, and historical references to promote collective values, reinforcing solidarity and cultural memory. This reflects a form of "updating tradition" within the framework of contemporary media. Conversely, *Caillou* utilizes a discourse that emphasizes individual needs and emotions, aligning with consumer culture and a more individualistic worldview. As Hall and Gay (1996: 70-72) suggest, identity development is shaped through its relation to others and is continually produced through the interplay of personal attributes, social connections, and cultural interactions. The linguistic and discursive forms that children encounter in these media texts play a crucial role in their identity formation. *Caillou's* individualistic and consumption-oriented discourse helps develop children's sense of personal rights and consumer awareness, while *Nasreddin Hoca's* instructive and culturally embedded discourse supports the formation of historical belonging and social connectedness. This supports Stuart Hall's theory of media representation and meaning-making, which underscores the ideological function of encoding and decoding processes in media (Hall, 2017: 7).



As Roland Barthes (2014: 150) highlights in his semiotic analysis, the values represented by these characters are not merely surface-level entertainment but symbolic structures embedded with deep cultural and ideological codes. The design of space and the behavior of characters play a critical role in reinforcing cultural norms in children's perceptions.

Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's (1997: 21) concepts of cultural capital and symbolic violence provide meaningful insight into how specific lifestyles are normalized and alternative identities marginalized through media. According to the findings, *Caillou* grows up in a pedagogically supportive family environment, surrounded by books, and his personal preferences are respected all indicative of a high cultural capital profile. In contrast, *Nasreddin Hoca* is depicted as a character shaped by collective consciousness, historical context, and public interest, rather than individual freedoms.

Jean Baudrillard's (1983: 3) theory of simulation shows how the hyperrealities presented in such programs shape children's perceptions of reality. In particular, *Caillou's* idealized lifestyle can significantly influence children's expectations and social relationships when compared to real-life experiences.

In conclusion, the ideological function of children's media in the development of economic and cultural identity is closely tied not only to structural content features but also to the forms of language and narration used. Considering that media characters shape children's social and cultural worlds and play a role in identity construction, it is essential to promote cultural diversity and ideological awareness in children's media production. This is crucial for enabling children to critically and healthily explore diverse identity models.

Media producers should adopt a more conscious approach to enhancing cultural representation in children's content and support multidimensional identity development. Moreover, it is important that these contents remain connected to children's real-life experiences and contribute to the development of media literacy. In doing so, children may develop pluralistic, multicultural, and critical identity perspectives beyond the singular identity and value models imposed through media.

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