The Landscape of Children's Television in the US & Canada

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Contents

A Closer Look at Human Characters

Method

A sample of TV programs (on traditional broadcasters) targeting children up to age 12 was recorded in the US and Canada, on both weekdays and weekends, during Fall 2017.

US Sample

- Broadcasters: Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Disney Jr., Nick Jr., Nickelodeon, Sprout–Universal Kids, and PBS Kids
- Hours of recording: 196
- Number of programs: 476 (431 fiction)
- Number of fictional main characters: 1,654 (684 human characters)

Canadian Sample

- Broadcasters: CBC, TVO, Family Jr., Teletoon, Treehouse, YTV, TFC
- Hours of recording: 154
- Number of programs: 595 (537 fiction)
- Number of fictional main characters: 1,826 (856 human characters)

Five trained coders (three females and two males) coded the programs following a comprehensive and identical codebook that included analysis of the program as a whole (e.g., its genre, country of origin, target age, the various professionals who were involved in its production) as well as all main characters represented in the program (e.g., their gender, race, age, ability, class, appearance, behavior).

Data were entered into a unified spreadsheet and statistically analyzed in the central research IZI office in Munich. The main findings of this process are presented here.
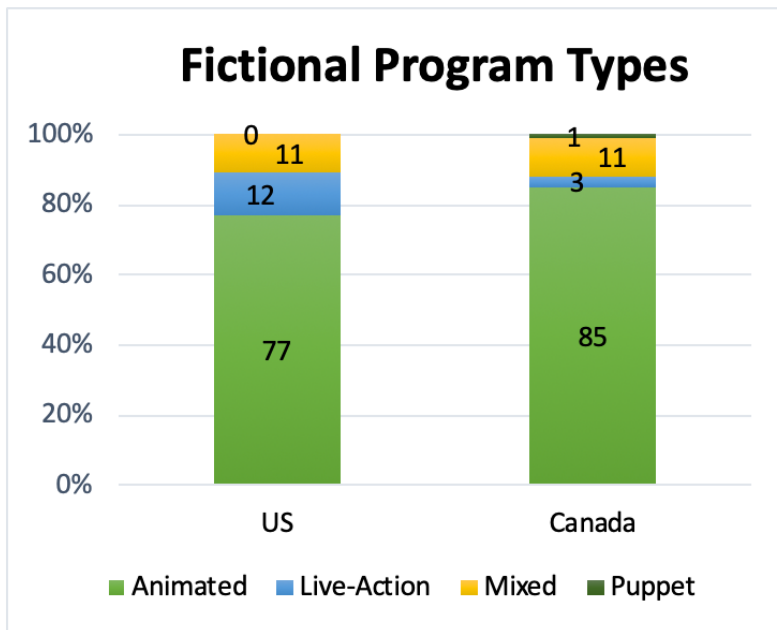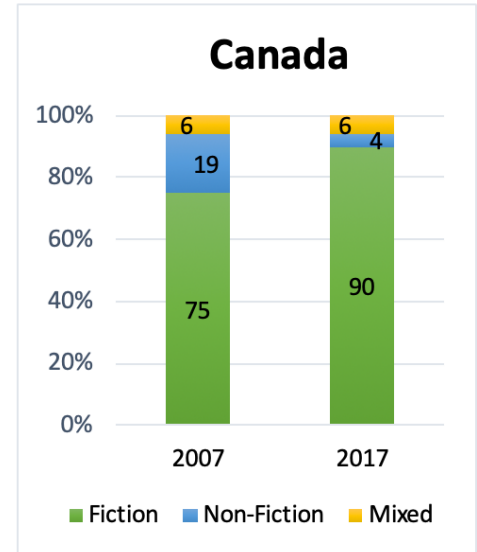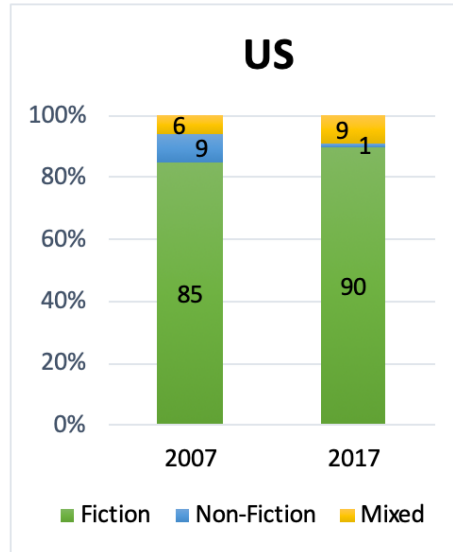
The Landscape...

The majority (90%) of children's programming in both the US and Canada is fictional. In the past ten years, the amount of non-fiction programming has plummeted, with fictional programming increasing in both countries.

US

Chart: US
- 2007: Fiction 85, Non-Fiction 9, Mixed 6
- 2017: Fiction 90, Non-Fiction 1, Mixed 9

■ Fiction ■ Non-Fiction ■ Mixed

Canada

Chart: Canada
- 2007: Fiction 75, Non-Fiction 19, Mixed 6
- 2017: Fiction 90, Non-Fiction 4, Mixed 6

■ Fiction ■ Non-Fiction ■ Mixed

Fictional Program Types

Chart: Fictional Program Types
- US: Animated 77, Live-Action 12, Mixed 11, Puppet 0
- Canada: Animated 85, Live-Action 3, Mixed 11, Puppet 1

■ Animated ■ Live-Action ■ Mixed ■ Puppet

Over three quarters of the fictional programs in both countries are animated (77% in US, 85% in Canada). The US has four times more live-action programs than Canada, where live-action shows have decreased by 5x since 2007. Both countries have 11% live action/animated mixed programs and very few puppet shows.

In both the US and Canada, commercial TV is overwhelmingly fictional compared to public TV (in the US, 98% vs. 35%; in Canada, 97% vs. 72%). In Canada, commercial TV is also more animated compared to public TV (92% vs 60%), although not so in the US (77% vs. 75%).

Actionable Insight. Content creators should consider the increased number of fictional & animated programs over the past ten years when looking for gaps in the market, particularly given the success of user-generated non-fictional content consumed by children on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram.

The majority of programs in both countries are aimed at children ages 5 and under (60% in the United States, 55% in Canada). Programs targeted for six- to nine-year-olds make up 29% of US shows and 44% of Canadian. Meanwhile, just 11% of US shows and only 1% of Canadian shows are geared towards tweens, which makes sense given the target ages of the broadcasters included in the sample.

Audience

	US	Canada
Tweens	11	1
6 to 9	29	44
5 & Under	60	55

■ 5 & Under ■ 6 to 9 ■ Tweens
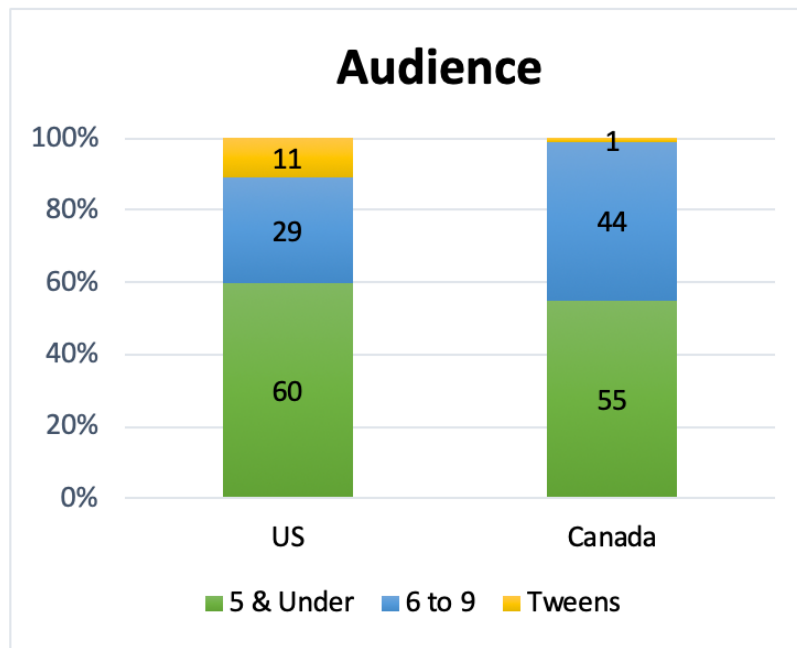
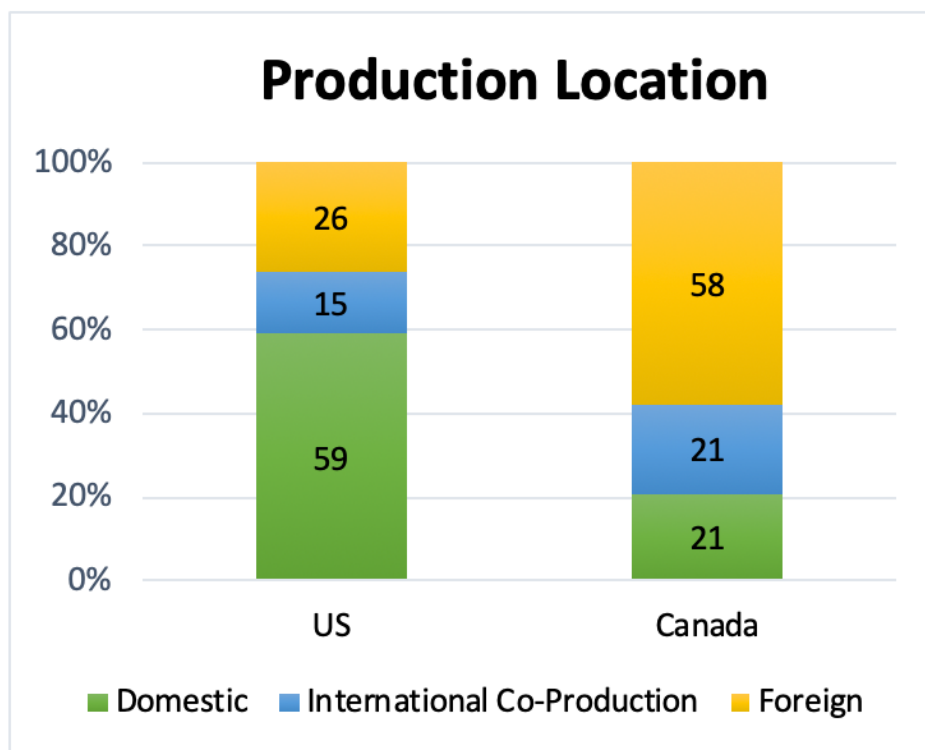*Actionable Insight.* Because channels dedicated to children's TV is geared younger, tweens often get left out when it comes to programs specifically created for them. Consequently, this "tweenage" 10-12 audience is pushed directly into watching older, sometimes age-inappropriate teen and adult programming. Content creators should therefore consider how to address the unique needs of this tween audience when developing programs.

Nearly three quarters of the fictional programs shown in the US are produced domestically (59%) or with an international co-production (15%). In Canada, close to half of the fictional programs are produced domestically (21%) or with co-production (21%). The number of domestic programs in both countries has decreased dramatically since 2007 (by 24% in US and by 36% in Canada).
In the US there is great variability between the channels studied in terms of foreign production (e.g. Disney with 9%, Disney Jr. with 17%, Nickelodeon with 18%, Nick Jr. with 48%, Sprout with 78%, and Public Channel PBS with 15%). Unsurprisingly, commercial Canadian TV has over 2x as many foreign productions as Public TV (66% vs. 32%).

Production Location

	US	Canada
Foreign	26	58
International Co-Production	15	21
Domestic	59	21

Legend: Domestic ■ International Co-Production ■ Foreign

Actionable Insight. There is a trend towards less purely domestic programs, and more foreign programs/international co-productions. Co-productions between the US and Canada are common, especially given the wealth of children's media expertise in both countries as well as tax incentives. Co-productions should therefore be embraced, but Canadian domestic production should not be forgotten.
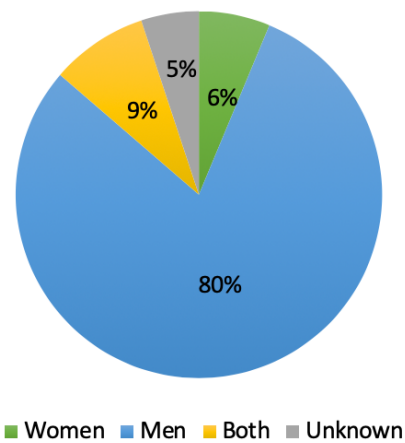
Directors. Only a small number of episodes are directed by women (6% in the US, 10% in Canada). Conversely, the vast majority (80% in the US, 82% in Canada) are directed by men. A small number are directed by a mixed-gender team with at least one woman (9% in the US, 6% in Canada).

Director (US)

- 6% Women
- 80% Men
- 9% Both
- 5% Unknown

■ Women ■ Men ■ Both ■ Unknown

Director (Canada)

- 10% Women
- 82% Men
- 6% Both
- 2% Unknown

■ Women ■ Men ■ Both ■ Unknown
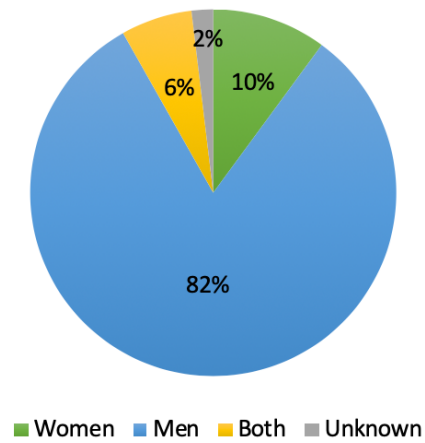
Creators. Similar to directing, the majority of shows are created by men (71% in the US, 62% in Canada). A small number are created by women, (15% the US, 18% in Canada), or a mixed-gender team with at least one woman (10% in the US, 11% in Canada).

Creator (US)
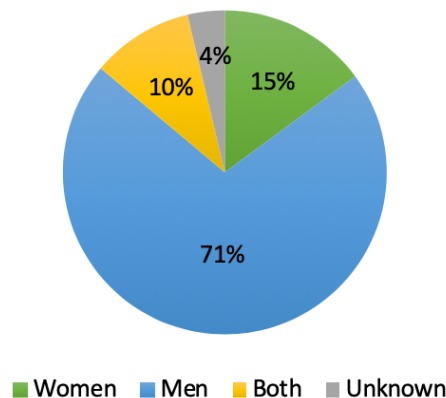
- 15% Women
- 71% Men
- 10% Both
- 4% Unknown

■ Women ■ Men ■ Both ■ Unknown

Creator (Canada)

- 18% Women
- 62% Men
- 11% Both
- 9% Unknown

■ Women ■ Men ■ Both ■ Unknown
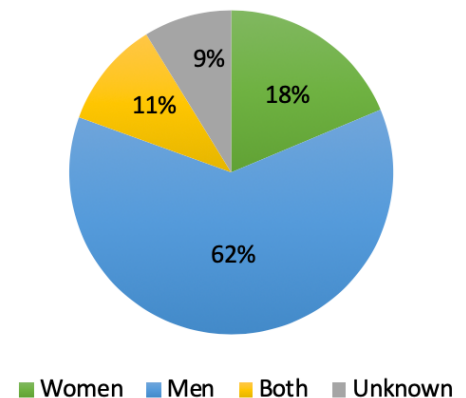
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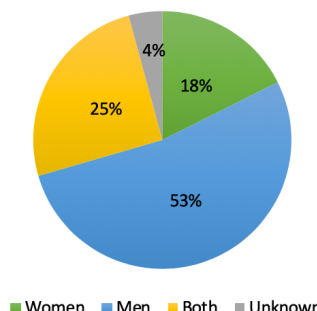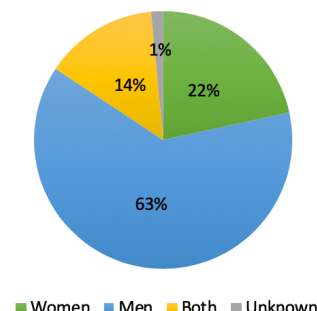***Writers.*** The majority of episodes are also written by men. Only 18% of episodes in the US (22% in Canada) are written by females. A quarter of episodes in the US (just 14% in Canada) included at least one female in a mixed-gender writing team.
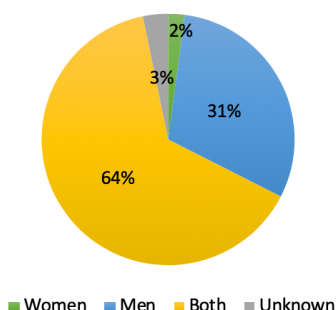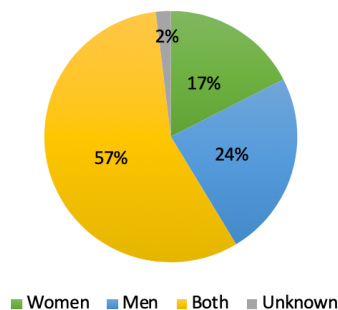
Writer (US)

- 18% Women
- 53% Men
- 25% Both
- 4% Unknown

Legend: Women, Men, Both, Unknown

Writer (Canada)

- 22% Women
- 63% Men
- 14% Both
- 1% Unknown

Legend: Women, Men, Both, Unknown

Producer (US)

- 2% Women
- 31% Men
- 64% Both
- 3% Unknown

Legend: Women, Men, Both, Unknown

Producer (Canada)

- 17% Women
- 24% Men
- 57% Both
- 2% Unknown

Legend: Women, Men, Both, Unknown

Producers. Women were far better represented in producer roles. The majority of episodes had a mixed-gender production team with at least one female (64% in the US, 57% in Canada).

Actionable Insight. The goal is for an equal representation of males and females behind the camera in order to provide more balanced content. We clearly have a long way to go, particularly when it comes to directors and show creators. The director has immense influence, and yet not even a quarter of episodes have a woman director involved. Similarly, show creators, who are developing the entire show premise and characters, have only a quarter of female representation.

Meanwhile, less than a quarter of episodes in both countries are actually written by women, although roughly a quarter has a team with at least one woman. This team number, however, is something to be cautious of. Writing teams are common (particularly writers' rooms where ideas are shared and episode outlines are formulated). These influential rooms are notorious for being filled with white men. As a clear need for diverse voices is made, there is the risk of merely placing "token" voices in the room. Females and writers of diverse backgrounds should be appropriately represented in the room to reflect today's diverse audience, without the expectation that one woman can speak for all women.

Within children's fictional programming, there are a myriad of character types. Nearly half are human characters (42% in US, 47% in Canada), and a third are animals (35% in US, 34% in Canada). The rest of the characters were made up of monsters/mythical creatures (18% in US, 9% in Canada), robots/machines (5% in US, 6% in Canada), and plants/objects/other (1% in US, 5% in Canada).

Both countries saw a decline in the number of human characters from 2007 to 2017 (by 6% in US, and by 12% in Canada).

Type of Character

US	Canada
1	5
5	6
18	9
35	34
42	47

Legend: Human, Animals, Monsters, Robots, Other
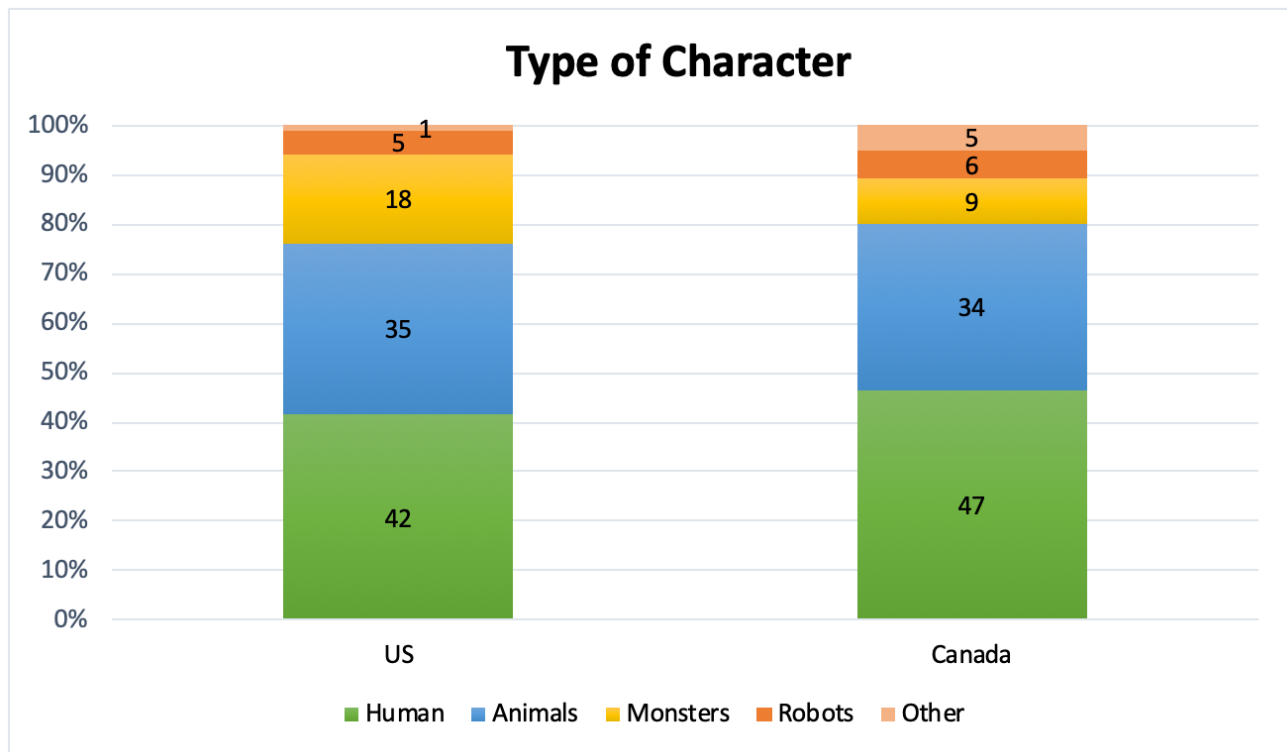
Actionable Insight. Because the majority (over three quarters) of fictional programs are animated, it is not surprising that over half of the characters are non-human. However, research suggests that children learn prosocial behaviors better from stories with human characters than with human-like anthropomorphic characters (e.g., talking animals). With the decline of human characters over the past ten years, and because of the dominance of programs targeting young children, content creators should strive to incorporate more human characters.
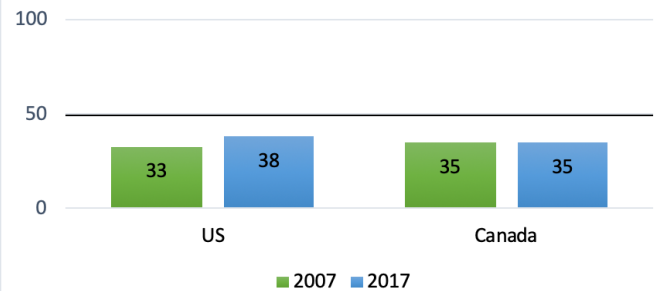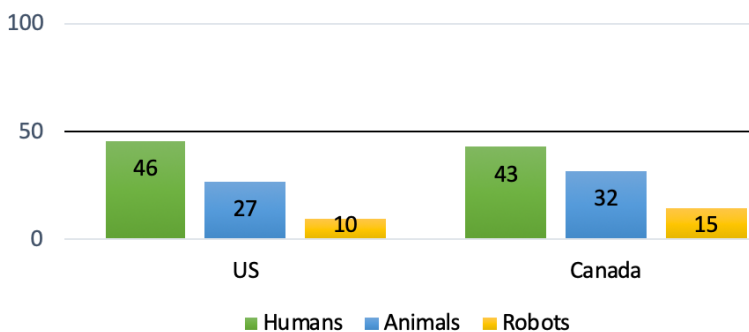
Gender of Characters
Male characters are still dominant, particularly for non-human characters.

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In 2007, one of the main findings was that only a third of main characters in children's fictional programming were female (33% in the US, and 35% in Canada). In 2017, programs in the US saw a slight improvement (38% female main characters) but Canadian programs remained the same (35% female). There was no gender difference in US and Canadian public vs. commercial TV. However, Disney channel had the highest percentage of female characters of all channels with 51%

Percentage of Females 2007 vs. 2017

	US		Canada	
2007	33		35	
2017		38		35

Percentage of Females by Character Type

	US			Canada		
Humans	46			43		
Animals		27			32	
Robots			10			15

Interestingly, as was the case in 2007, this gender gap is driven by the non-human characters. The ratio of males to females is far closer to 50/50 within human characters (46% in the US, 43% in Canada), whereas the percentage of female characters within animal characters is far from an equal balance (27% in the US, 32% in Canada). The percentage of robots/machines that are female is particularly dismal (10% in the US, 15% in Canada). This suggests that the farther away from humans the characters are constructed (e.g. animals, robots)– the more the professionals creating them default to male characters. Voice narration is another place where males dominate: far more programs have solo male narration (3x more in the US and 8x more in Canada).

Actionable Insight. Although the percentage of female main characters compared to males is still quite low (hovering around a third female representation), the problem is clearly stemming from anthropomorphic, animated, non-human characters (e.g. talking animals & robots). These characters, however, should be the easiest ones to strike a 50/50 gender balance with (as no casting or major appearance changes are needed). Therefore, creators and writers of animated programs featuring non-human characters should make a particular effort to create and write 50% of all characters as female.

A Closer Look at Human Characters

Animated and Live Action

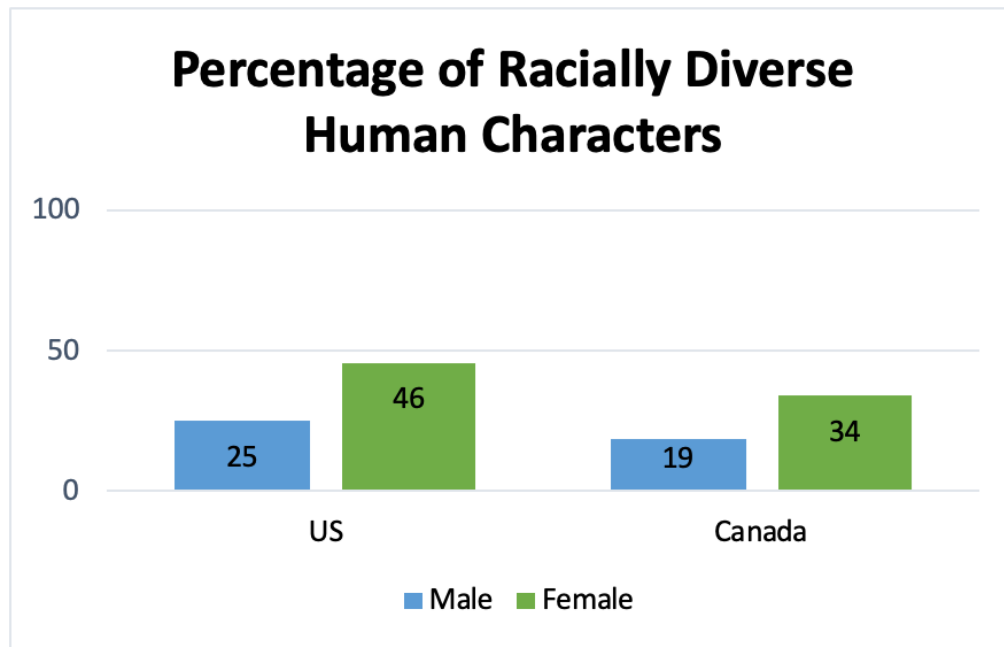The majority of human characters on children's TV are Caucasian (65% in the US, 74% in Canada). Females are nearly 2x as likely to be portrayed as persons of color or racially ambiguous than males (46% vs. 25% in US; 34% vs. 19% in Canada).

Percentage of Racially Diverse Human Characters

Bar chart showing percentage of racially diverse human characters:
- US: Male 25, Female 46
- Canada: Male 19, Female 34

Legend: ■ Male ■ Female

Actionable Insight. Although the proportion of Caucasians to racially diverse on-screen characters is somewhat reflective of the actual population (in the US with significant under representation mainly of Latinx population), content creators today should be creating and casting more diverse characters than ever to keep up with the audience of tomorrow, who are growing up in an increasingly diverse world.

The fact that female characters are more likely to be portrayed as persons of color suggests that some shows might be trying to "check two boxes" with one casting. This creates a misguided situation where a character is suddenly the primary voice not only for her gender but for her race as well. In turn, without room to explore various facets of both females and people of color, writers are more likely to turn to inaccurate stereotypes. Therefore, just as there should be an on-screen gender balance, racially diverse characters should also be balanced across genders.
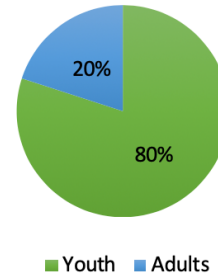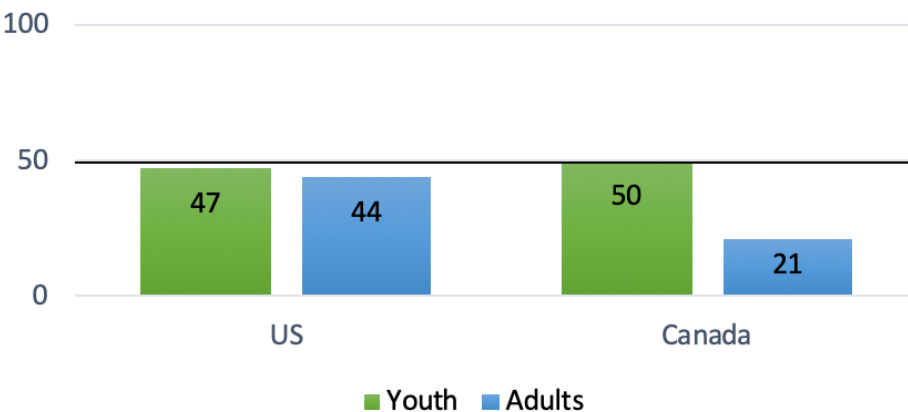
The majority of human characters portrayed on fictional children's TV are youth (defined as babies through teenagers). In both countries, 80% of the characters were youth, compared to 20% adults.

Age of Human Characters: US & Canada

- Youth 80%
- Adults 20%

Percentage of Human Females by Age of Character

	US	Canada
Youth	47	50
Adults	44	21

A closer look at the gender ratios within these two age categories reveals that the gender balance is better within the youth category compared to adults. This result was less dramatic in the US, but in Canada it is clear that any gender imbalance is driven by adult characters: 50% of the youth characters are female, whereas only 21% of the adult characters are female.

Actionable Insight. The results reveal that content creators are actually doing a good job of balancing the gender amongst children and teenage human characters. Where more balance is needed (particularly for content shown in Canada) is for more female representation in the adult characters.

Disabilities
Characters with disabilities are absent.

Signs of obvious physical disabilities were virtually absent among human characters in the two samples (just 1% in the US, 0% in Canada), and no human character in either sample had an obvious serious chronic disease.

Actionable Insight. It is important for all children to see themselves reflected on screen, especially those with disabilities who don't always see people who look like them on a daily basis.
Television also provides a way to normalize and model acceptance for others, regardless of disability or illness. Content creators should strive to find ways to feature productive and happy people with disabilities, both on-screen and off, particularly given that nearly 20% of the population lives with a disability.

Character Traits
Characters are mostly positive and collaborative, with some traits differentiated by gender.

The human characters in children's television are positioned as particularly positive, with the vast majority classified as protagonists (93% in US, 95% in Canada). Males are more likely to be portrayed as antagonists than females (e.g., in the US, 3% of females are antagonists vs. 9% of males).

Teamwork is highly emphasized in children's programming. The vast majority of main characters are defined as working in groups or duos (98% in US, 88% in Canada). Similarly, the majority of characters are portrayed as having equal roles (81% in US, 77% in Canada). In both countries, however, males are 2x more likely to be depicted as leaders and approximately 3x as likely to be portrayed as loners. Notably, public TV in both countries has a higher percentage of female leaders than commercial TV.

Finally, in both countries, females on children's TV are 2x as likely to use magic to resolve problems, while males are more likely use STEM skills and physical power.

Actionable Insight. Females on children's TV could benefit from being portrayed in roles that males typically occupy, such as antagonists and leaders. Furthermore, stereotypes should be removed from the ways children problem solve (i.e., with females being able to use talents, smarts, expertise, and strength and not only magic and talk).

Economic Diversity
Middle class dominates the screens

The most common economic class portrayed on children's TV is "middle class" (defined from a visual perspective as owning a flat/home, owning a car, living in a nice neighborhood, and wearing nice clothing). In both countries, however, a mere 2% of the main characters were given a "lower class" classification, which was defined as living in a very small flat/home, in a difficult neighborhood, or experiencing obvious poverty.

Actionable Insight. Children's TV should strive to accurately portray children's lives, including realistic economic hardships. This will help children, who often feel shame over economic issues, feel less alone and sensitize more economically fortunate children to other children's life experiences. Given that in the US and Canada, approximately 20% of children live below the poverty line, it is clear that children's TV is missing the mark when it comes to portraying economic diversity.

Appearance
Females are more likely to be thin and sexualized.

Thinness and sexualization, both subjective topics, are more difficult to analyze and thus the following results should be taken as informative but not definitive.

The majority of human characters in both countries are portrayed as thin or very thin, with females more likely to be portrayed as thin than males (e.g. in Canada, females are more than 1.5x as likely to be thin or nearly thin than males). The breakdown of Canadian public vs. commercial TV reveals that this difference is driven by commercial TV portrayals, where females are 2x as likely to be portrayed as thin or very thin than in public TV.

Sexualization of characters is also common in children's TV, with 38% of the US sample sexualized based on appearances (e.g. revealing clothing, clothing that emphasizes breasts/abs, long eye-lashes and sensual lips, etc). Unsurprisingly, females were nearly 2x as likely to be sexualized as males (50% of females vs. 29% of males in the US).

Actionable Insight. When casting actors and when creating animated human characters, producers should make an effort to portray all body types. Children are highly influenced by what they see on-screen, and the accumulated body of research suggests that the cultural glorification of female thinness and sexualization is correlated with the prevalence of eating disorders and low self-esteem. Showing realistic body types can help boost self-confidence in viewers and promote acceptance and tolerance toward self and others.

Genre

Main Result: Children's TV is mostly animated fiction.
Actionable Insight: Consider more non-fiction programming, particularly given the success of user-generated online content.

Audience

Main Result: Young children comprise the main audience.
Actionable Insight: Create content targeted towards tween audiences as well.

Production Location

Main Result: The United States produces more programs domestically than Canada.
Actionable Insight: Content creators should continue to embrace co-productions, and Canada should invest more in domestically relevant content.

Behind the Scenes

Main Result: Males dominate the professions behind the scenes.
Actionable Insight: Increased female representation is critically needed behind the scenes, particularly in director and show creator roles.

Type of Characters

Main Result: Human characters are on the decline.
Actionable Insight: Include more human characters, as children learn better from human (rather than anthropomorphized) characters.

Gender of Characters

Main Result: Male characters are still dominant, particularly for non-human characters.
Actionable Insight: Strive for a 50-50 balance of male/female characters, especially in animation among anthropomorphized characters.

Race of Characters

Main Result: Diverse characters are more likely to be female.
Actionable Insight: Have an equal number of male diverse characters as female diverse characters.

Age of Characters

Main Result: Majority of characters are young people.
Actionable Insight: Portray characters of diverse ages from babies to elderly.

Disabilities

Main Result: Characters with disabilities are virtually absent.
Actionable Insight: Portray physical disabilities as part of normal life.

Character Traits

Main Result: Characters are mostly positive and collaborative, with some traits differentiated by gender.
Actionable Insight: Show more females as leaders, antagonists, and avoid stereotypes such as females using magic and males using physical power and STEM to solve problems. Consider more non-fiction programming, particularly given the success of user-generated online content.

Economic Diversity

Main Result: Middle class dominates the screens.
Actionable Insight: Show more characters living in lower class to reflect the viewing audience.

Appearance

Main Result: Females are more likely to be thin and sexualized.
Actionable Insight: Portray a variety of body types.

For more information:

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