

Reinforcing Animal Conservation Ideology in Children's Media through Cultivation Theory and Gestalt Principles

Johanna Ratuwani Sundah^{1)*}, Hafiz Aziz Ahmad²⁾

^{1,2)}Master of Design Study Program, Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

Email : jjoannasoe@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significance of storytelling in children's media as a means to reinforce conservation ideology, particularly regarding the protection of Indonesia's endemic wildlife. By applying Cultivation Theory, a communication framework developed by George Gerbner that posits long-term media exposure can influence an individual's perceptions of social reality, this research emphasizes how early and consistent exposure to conservation-themed content can shape children's environmental awareness and values. Children's media, including storybooks, animated films, and television series, serve not only as entertainment but also as a powerful tool for education and character development. Through visual storytelling, messages related to animal protection, ecological balance, and social responsibility can be effectively communicated in ways that are engaging and emotionally resonant for young audiences. The analysis focuses on narrative structures and visual elements, such as character design, setting, color, and sequence, which contribute to a child's understanding and retention of conservation messages. The study finds that consistent use of symbolic imagery and compelling narratives fosters emotional involvement, empathy toward wildlife, and a sense of personal responsibility in children. This emotional engagement, paired with repeated exposure to conservation themes, strengthens memory retention and encourages pro-environmental behavior. Furthermore, the combination of Cultivation Theory and visual storytelling, supported by psychological principles such as Gestalt theory, proves to be an effective educational strategy. It highlights the potential of children's media to not only entertain but also to shape attitudes and ideologies that support environmental stewardship from an early age. Ultimately, this research underscores the vital role of storytelling in shaping a more ecologically conscious generation.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling, Children's Media, Visual Narrative, Cultivation Theory, Gestalt Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Visual media, especially those created and curated for children, plays a significant role in shaping characters and children's understanding of the world around them. In this era of media literacy, children learn from what they see (Kress, 2003). Children's storybooks serve not only as a source of entertainment but also powerful educational tools for conveying moral messages, social values, and specific ideologies. One effective approach to delivering and reinforcing these messages is through storytelling. Storytelling combines narratives and visual elements to create engaging and educational stories. This technique allows children to become emotionally involved with the story, which in turn can strengthen the understanding and memory of the messages conveyed. Storytelling can also be used to introduce and reinforce important concepts from an early age, including animal and environmental conservation.



Figure 1. Children's Storybook
(Source: pragmaticmom.com)

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, provides a useful framework for understanding how long-term exposure to media can shape individuals' perceptions and beliefs about social reality. The theory posits that continuous exposure to certain messages in media can shape a person's worldview and influence their attitude and behaviours. In current media curated for children, cultivation theory can be utilized to build a strong foundation of values related to animal and environmental conservation. Visual storytelling in children's media plays a vital role in shaping understanding and values from an early age. Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of visual media in enhancing children's cognitive and affective development.

First, a study by Sari (2014) found that the use of picture media significantly improved the visual-spatial intelligence of children aged 5 to 6 years at TK Islam Siti Hajar Medan. This emphasizes the importance of visual media in supporting children's cognitive growth.

Second, research by Paramita (2014) showed that using picture-based media increased learning interest among children at TK Aisyiyah Blangkejeren. This study underscores the role of visual media in motivating and engaging young learners.

Third, a joint study by Sudirman and Paramita (2015) further reinforced these findings by demonstrating the positive impact of picture media on learning interest among children in the same institution. These results support the idea that visual media can significantly boost participation and enthusiasm in early childhood education.

Fourth, a doctoral study by Sarah Nst (2018) highlighted the beneficial effects of audiovisual media on vocabulary development in children aged 4–5 at TK Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal. The research provides additional support for the role of multimedia in enhancing early language acquisition during formative educational years.

While these studies emphasize the educational benefits of visual media, there remains a research gap regarding the application of Gestalt principles and Cultivation Theory in children's media to deliver conservation messages, particularly those related to protecting Indonesia's endemic wildlife. Few studies have examined how visual perception principles from Gestalt theory can be used to strengthen conservation narratives in children's media. Similarly, limited research has explored how Cultivation Theory can explain the long-term influence of such media on children's development of environmental values.

This study seeks to fill the existing research gap by analysing the application of Gestalt principles in the visual design of children's media and evaluating their effectiveness in conveying conservation messages. It also aims to examine how Cultivation Theory is applied in storytelling to understand how consistent exposure to conservation-themed media can shape children's perceptions and values related to environmental and animal conservation from an early age. The research will explore how visual narratives and storytelling techniques, supported by Gestalt principles, enhance message delivery and emotional engagement in children's media. By understanding how both

Cultivation Theory and visual perception principles are employed in children's storybooks, animations, and other media formats, this study aims to demonstrate how such content can be effectively used for educational purposes, character development, and the internalization of conservation values. Ultimately, this research is expected to provide deeper insights into the role of storytelling as a powerful tool for instilling environmental responsibility and empathy toward wildlife in young audiences.

METHOD

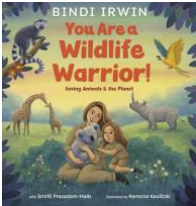
Visual narrative or storytelling is a method of conveying stories through images, graphics, and other visual media to create emotional engagement and meaning. As Padia (2016) explains, visual narratives can take many forms, including varied timelines and characters. In children's films, this approach is especially important because it enhances engagement and makes content easier to understand. Horváth (2019) notes that strong visual narratives can trigger empathetic responses in viewers. In today's digital age, this has evolved into digital storytelling—an integration of narrative, images, audio, and video to create interactive stories (Robin, 2008). According to Lambert (2013), digital storytelling aims to deliver vivid and meaningful messages. From these statements, it can be seen that the function of digital storytelling is to enable the storyteller to convey messages in a more vivid and meaningful way. Digital storytelling consists of several key elements that help communicate messages, including narrative, visuals, audio, and audience interactivity. It also offers several benefits in children's education. First, children tend to remember stories more easily when they are presented visually and interactively (Sadik, 2008). Furthermore, children are more likely to become emotionally engaged with the stories they watch, which enhances their understanding and empathy (Robin, 2006). Storytelling can be an effective tool for conveying environmental messages. It is a powerful medium for educating children about environmental conservation by making messages more relatable and memorable (Van Gils, 2005).

Cultivation Theory, developed by Gerbner and Gross, posits that long-term media exposure shapes perceptions of social reality. Initially focused on national television's influence (Gerbner et al., 1980), it now includes broader media forms and their impact on personal values. In children's media, cultivation theory explains how repeated exposure to positive messages promotes awareness of environmental responsibility. Chen et al. (2023) demonstrated that media can model behaviours and shape professional norms, while Junaidi (2018) discussed the theory's place in media effects debates. Complementing this is Gestalt Theory, which emphasizes that people perceive visuals as unified wholes rather than separate parts (Graham, 2008). Children, like adults, group visual elements using principles like similarity, proximity, and continuity, which are essential tools for analysing children's animations. These principles enhance message delivery and comprehension through visual cohesion. As Lowell (2008) notes, environmental education benefits from re-establishing a child's connection to nature, a goal that well-structured visual storytelling can help achieve.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

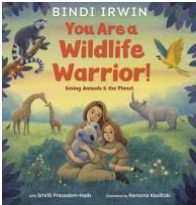
When applied to children, cultivation theory suggests that repeated exposure to certain themes in media can influence how they understand and interpret social reality. For example, films or animated series that frequently feature environmental messages, such as conservation and animal protection, can help shape pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours, as well as raise awareness about the need to protect nature among children. They will begin to internalize these values and associate them with real actions in their daily lives. This exposure can also foster empathy toward animals and the environment, encouraging children to develop a sense of responsibility for the planet. Over time, these repeated media messages can contribute to the formation of long-lasting environmental values and norms. Parents and educators can further reinforce these messages by discussing the content and encouraging eco-friendly practices. This can be seen in several examples of children's films, series, and storybooks focused on environmental conservation and wildlife protection, as outlined in the table below.

Table 1. Analysis of Media for Children on Enviromental Conservation

Title of The Media	Short Synopsis	Message Received by Audience
	The Lorax tells the story of a boy named Ted who lives in the city of Thneedville, where everything is artificial and there are no real plants. Ted sets out to find an original Truffula tree to impress the girl of his dreams, Audrey. In his search, he meets the Once-ler, who tells him how the Truffula trees disappeared because of his greed. The Once-ler also introduces Ted to the Lorax, the guardian of the forest who tries to protect the trees. With strong determination, Ted strives to replant the Truffula trees to restore the beauty of nature.	When children watch The Lorax, they become more aware of reforestation and the importance of planting trees to maintain the balance of the surrounding environment.
	From the daughter of Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, comes an illustrated picture book encouraging readers to walk on the wild side and uncover their inner conservationists. You Are A Wildlife Warrior! tells the story of Bindi and her daughter's daily life as animal conservationists. It introduces various wildlife animals and teaches readers how to take care of them.	This book teaches children to become more aware of animal conservation and what a conservationist does on a daily basis.
	Wonder Pets! follows the adventures of three pets: Linny the guinea pig, Tuck the turtle, and Ming-Ming the duck, who work together to save animals in trouble. Using their Flyboat, the trio travels the world to answer calls for help. Each mission emphasizes teamwork, problem-solving, and compassion for other living beings.	Wonder Pets! helps children learn about different types of animals, their strengths and weaknesses, and how to save these animals if they are in danger.

Gestalt theory, which examines how people perceive visuals as unified wholes rather than fragmented parts, offers valuable insight into the design and effectiveness of children's media. This theory emphasizes that perception is not merely a sum of individual elements, but a process where the mind actively interprets patterns, shapes, and relationships to create meaning. In children's media, Gestalt principles can be strategically employed to enhance both the aesthetic quality and educational value of the contents, particularly when addressing complex themes like environmental conservation. For instance, films and books such as Wonder Pets, You Are A Wildlife Warrior!, and The Lorax serve as compelling case studies, using visual storytelling techniques rooted in Gestalt theory to communicate important ecological messages in ways that are accessible and engaging for young audiences. To explore how these media use Gestalt principles, this analysis focuses on five key concepts: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, proximity, similarity, continuity, and closure. Each principle provides a lens through which the integration of characters, scenery, motion, and narrative structure can be examined. For example, the principle of similarity might be observed in the use of repeated shapes or colors to unify characters with the environment, subtly reinforcing harmony with nature. Proximity can guide the viewer's focus and strengthen character relationships, while continuity ensures smooth transitions that maintain narrative flow and visual coherence. Closure allows viewers, especially children, to mentally "fill in the blanks," encouraging active engagement with the story. The following sections will explore in detail how each of the five Gestalt principles is manifested in these children's animations and how they contribute to the effective delivery of messages about environmental awareness and responsibility.

Table 2. Analysis of Gestalt Theory in Media for Children

Visual Narration in Media	Gestalt Principles			
	Whole Sum	Proximity	Similarity	Continuity
	The visualization of the forest and its life is presented as a unified whole, so that when one element, such as a Truffula tree, is removed, the entire ecosystem is affected.	The proximity of the Truffula trees to the surrounding creatures illustrates their interconnectedness. Children are encouraged to observe how human actions affecting one element of nature can impact many other nearby elements.	The visual representation of the Truffula trees reflects real-life trees. Their similarity to one another reinforces the message that each tree is important and an integral part of the larger ecosystem.	The story presents a consistent sequence of steps in the mission to save the environment, beginning with the act of planting a tree.
	The book is designed as an integrated experience. These elements are not meant to stand alone; together, they form a cohesive narrative that emphasizes the importance of every action in protecting wildlife.	Visual layouts in the book, such as images of animals placed near information about their species, reinforce the idea of connection. This proximity helps young readers gain information on how to care for wildlife.	Consistently adding drawings of Bindi and her daughter helping animals correlates the fact that as a child they could also be a wildlife warrior.	The book follows a progression, from identifying animals, how to be a good wildlife warrior, to offering simple, age-appropriate solutions to help protect them.
	The story is structured in such a way that each animal rescue mission is not seen as an isolated act, but rather as part of a team effort. Children perceive the entire storyline as a unified whole, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and working together.	The animals rescued by the Wonder Pets are often shown in close proximity to their natural habitats. This visual closeness helps children understand the strong relationship between living creatures and their environments. Even when some elements of the habitat are not fully shown, children are able to mentally "complete the picture," recognizing the implied	The three main characters wear matching capes, similar to superheroes, which helps children identify them as part of the same team working toward a common goal.	Each episode follows a continuous narrative structure, presenting a consistent sequence of steps in the environmental rescue missions by saving animals. This use of a flowing storyline guides children smoothly from one event to the next while reinforcing the underlying

As shown in the table above, all three media incorporate Gestalt theory into their visuals and storytelling. A particularly notable commonality lies in the application of the closure principle. In these visual narratives, closure is consistently presented through an underlying message that animals and the environment can ultimately be saved, and that the protagonists succeed in helping nature. This narrative resolution inspires children and boosts their confidence, reinforcing the belief that they, too, can make a difference. After consuming the environmentally themed media supported by media cultivation theory, children can gain the following benefits. First of all, its cognitive function. Children can recognize the main characters who fight for the environment and begin to understand the strategies these protagonists use to protect nature. This function is aligned with what Reid (2015)

describes as "connecting children to the world," where children begin to make sense of their surroundings through their favorite characters. By imagining themselves as those characters, they develop an affinity for the actions portrayed; such as protecting endangered animals, avoiding littering, and preserving natural habitats.

There are also the emotional benefits. Children often imagine themselves as part of the stories, which increases emotional connection. They may be inspired to imitate the positive behavior of their favorite characters, such as planting trees after watching *The Lorax* or showing compassion for animals after reading *You Are a Wildlife Warrior!: Saving Animals & the Planet*.

Watching and reading about environmental films and books also serves as a form of recreation. These stories allow children to enjoy imaginative journeys, whether to outer space, forests, oceans, or through friendships with animals. According to Mayer (2001), such experiences help children grasp new concepts that they might not encounter in real life. Animated films can foster a love for nature and encourage children to apply what they've seen in their daily lives. For example, after watching *The Lorax*, a child might be motivated to plant a tree. Similarly, *You Are A Wildlife Warrior!* may inspire empathy and concern for animals. These media also have an academic function, contributing to children's knowledge of nature and environmental science.

Research applying Gestalt theory shows that effective visual organization in children's animations can significantly strengthen the delivery of educational messages. Gestalt principles; such as wholeness, proximity, similarity, and continuity help children make connections between the elements in a story. For instance, in *The Lorax*, the forest ecosystem is presented as a single, interconnected whole, affected by the removal of Truffula trees. This implicitly teaches the importance of each component of nature. Storytelling, which combines narrative and visual elements, creates engaging and educational experiences. This technique allows children to connect emotionally with stories, which in turn enhances their understanding and memory of the messages being delivered. For example, *You Are A Wildlife Warrior!* utilizes storytelling to show human-animal interactions, helping children grasp the significance of animal protection through engaging narratives.

By understanding how Gestalt theory and digital storytelling are applied in children's animation, we can more effectively harness media as a tool for education and character development. The use of digital storytelling in children's media is not only entertaining but also educational. Shaping a young generation to become more environmentally conscious and socially responsible

CONCLUSION

Media cultivation theory suggests that long-term exposure to messages in media can shape individuals' perceptions and beliefs about social reality. Repeated exposure to environmental themes in animations such as *Wonder Pets*, *Go, Diego, Go!*, and *The Lorax* helps foster pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours= in children, encouraging them to take positive actions. The application of Gestalt principles in these animations reinforces environmental messages through effective visual and narrative organization. Children are guided to understand the interconnectedness of natural elements and the importance of collective action.

Digital storytelling in these animations effectively communicates environmental messages, teaching values such as cooperation, responsibility, and empathy. Children's animations are not only entertaining but also educational, shaping a younger generation that is more environmentally aware and socially responsible. This study highlights the importance of digital storytelling in children's education, as a foundational tool for instilling positive values about animal and environmental conservation from an early age.

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