Article

Evaluation of Children's Discourses Regarding Imaginary Companion: The Case of Türkiye

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Abstract: Preschool children's imaginary companions are a relatively unexplored phenomenon. This article provides information about a qualitative study investigating Turkish children's statements about their imaginary companions. Forty-six children aged between 48–60 months were interviewed. A phenomenological pattern was used to explore themes in the research. As a result of the research, six themes and 24 categories were created. When the themes were reviewed, it was seen that the children's imaginary companions were male in terms of gender, clothing, and accessories in terms of appearance characteristics, and happiness in terms of mood characteristics. In addition, considering the thinking status of their imaginary companions, it was determined that they concentrated in the category of entertainment/game, in the category of communication skills in terms of liked/admirable features, and finally in the category of negative behaviour as disliked/unadmirable features. Addressing imaginary companions in children's lives in different dimensions can contribute to their development.

Keywords: preschool; imaginary companion; phenomenology

1. Introduction

Friendship development manifests itself in children's behavioural distinctions among peers. During the first two years of life, children begin to show preferences for certain playmates and differentiate their behaviour with various children. These preferences and behavioral differences are relatively stable, suggesting that they may be the first signs of friendship, described as a "close, mutual, bilateral relationship". Then, around the age of four, the concept of friendship emerges verbally when children begin to use the word "friend" about certain peers [1].

While some children communicate with their real friends, some interact with non-existent friends they pretend to be authentic and whose physical and personality traits have been determined. Often, such friends become essential assets in children's lives over a long period. This imaginary company is a form of childhood fantasy [2]. Early studies defined an imaginary companion as an invisible friend the child talks or play with and refer to when communicating with others [3]. Although there are many definitions of imaginary companions, in the most general sense, they are invisible characters named and referred to while chatting with other individuals or playing directly for a specific time, which has a perception of reality for the child. This does not include imaginary games in which an object is personified or the child assumes the role of an individual in his/her environment [4]. Attempts have been made to explain this phenomenon in different ways.

The imaginary companion can serve various dynamic functions for the preschool child. Sometimes the imaginary company may be a superego helper that teaches or controls the child's impulses or behaviour. Sometimes, the imaginary company can be a tool for the child who has internalized parental prohibitions or is afraid of parental criticism to

evacuate illegal behaviors. Sometimes, loneliness or neglect can motivate children to create these fantasy companions. In such cases, the imaginary companion may disappear as the child goes to school and makes real friendships [5].

Research on imaginary companions has the potential to provide new insights into children's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, the impact of fantasy's emotional content on this distinction, and, more generally, the role fantasy plays in emotional and cognitive development [6]. From this point of view, research on imaginary companions of preschool children is widely discussed in developmental and psychoanalytic literature. Studies show that between 20% and 30% of preschool children have imaginary companions. In contrast, the most recent studies show that as many as 65% or even more preschool children create imaginary companions in some way [2,4]. The prevalence of these creations throughout development plays a vital role in development. However, the variety and richness of details about children's imaginary companions make systematic descriptions of their functional significance very difficult. Instead, many studies focus on the differences between children with and without imaginary companions [7,8].

It is emphasized that children with imaginary companions are more social, less shy, have more real friends, and are more creative and participate more in family activities than children without imaginary companions [6]. The existence of only one imaginary companion in a child's life is revealing in terms of social functioning. Children can use imaginary companies to develop their competence. At other times, imaginary companions may develop briefly to assist the child in compensating for challenging aspects of the child's external reality. The child development literature treats the phenomenon as a more interesting developmental event, as the imaginary companion represents only a backup friend during the early socialization of the lonely child [5]. The primary function of an imaginary companion is seen as a central feature of friendship in the preschool period. In addition, four-year-old children with imaginary companions need to distinguish between real and imaginary companies regarding the conflict in relationships, instrumental assistance, and care. Furthermore, as with real friends, imaginary companions sometimes follow their creators' wishes. Children imagine conflicts with them; sometimes, they are afraid or angry with them, and sometimes they act as if they are not available to play [6].

In this respect, the imaginary companion is conceptualized as a transitional phenomenon for important developmental and psychological purposes. According to this theory, transitional phenomena enable the child to develop a sense of self, cope with frustration when his/her needs are not met immediately, and cope with anxiety in an environment the child does not control. In short, imaginary companions support children in expressing their creativity, improving their quality of life, and developing imaginary worlds that add colour to life. It is seen as a place in the direction of [3,9].

Current Study

International research has revealed that various studies generally focus on the characteristics of preschool- and school-age children. These include imaginary companions, the influence of imaginary companions on the children, children with and without imaginary companions, longitudinal studies on children identified as at high risk of developing problematic behavior, the experience of the characteristics of imaginary companions, and the purposes served. Interview and questionnaire-type assessment tools were used in such studies. While data were collected from parents and teachers as participants, data were collected directly from young children to a small extent [2,3,10–12]. In this study, the time in which imaginary friends are most common was selected, and children's discourses towards their imaginary friends were examined in depth. Furthermore, data were collected as a result of direct interviews with children. In addition, the drawing technique was used to explore children's views and experiences. These points are essential in revealing the study's main differences and originality. In this way, children could express their feelings and thoughts more easily.

In light of all this information, it is stated that imaginary companions, whether developmental or reactive, serve several purposes. In general, theoretical orientations conceptualize imaginary companions as facilitating the understanding of reality, supporting cognitive, emotional, and social development, enabling children to react to events in their lives, facilitating a developing sense of self, and providing companionship. An in-depth investigation of children's explanations of their imaginary companions and interactions with them will contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon and provide more information. This discovery has opened up new possibilities for investigating the phenomenon and improving our understanding. It is essential to determine the thoughts of preschool children toward imaginary companions and primarily to design the imaginary companion phenomenon in light of these views. Based on this idea, the research aims to evaluate the discourses used by 48–60-month-old children when describing their imaginary companions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Model

In the research, phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used. Phenomenology is fundamentally practical, as it always presents unique situations (interactions, reactions, and lived experiences). It helps each individual to respond competently and adaptively in a specific time, place, and context [13]. Phenomenological studies are subjective since researchers are seen as analysis and interpretation tools. Therefore, personal experiences, values, prejudices, and relationships with the studied phenomenon affect the research process [14]. In the research, phenomenology design was used to understand, describe, and interpret the imaginary companion phenomenon of preschool children.

2.2. Participants

The purposive sampling method was used in the research in which the phenomenology design was used. Purposive sampling is a type of sampling used when a more targeted strategy is needed. The purposeful sampling type is homogeneous sampling since it is interested in studying a group with similar characteristics to define a particular group in depth. Purposeful sampling is based on the researcher's decision when choosing the study units [15,16]. The researchers tried to select the appropriate participants and determine the characteristics of the participants in line with the purpose of the research. These features consist of 48–60-month-old children and the criteria for children to have imaginary companions since the preschool period is the period when imaginary companions are most common, and it is stated that the peak is four years old [17]. Considering these criteria, the study group of the research was formed. The research was carried out with 46 children aged between 48–60 months who attended independent kindergartens affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in the city center of Ankara, Türkiye, in 2022. Confidentiality was ensured by giving the children the codes C1, C2, C3,..., and C46.

2.3. Data Collection Tool

In studies involving children, the data collection tool should be chosen carefully. Children differ from adults, and understanding their lives and views requires using different methods appropriate to their competencies, knowledge, interests, and contexts. Using different verbal and visual methods to make children feel comfortable provides the most accurate data [18].

For this reason, the mosaic approach was used to collect data in the research. The mosaic approach can be defined as using multiple data collection methods to ask different people about the subject in collecting information [19]. In this context, the "General Information Form", "Imaginary Companion Descriptive Interview Form", and "Picture Drawing Technique" were used as data collection tools in the research, which includes demographic characteristics of preschool children and their families.

General Information Form—The form, developed by the researchers, consists of questions about the child's date of birth, gender, number of children in the family, preschool education process, parental education level, and profession. The children's parents filled in general information forms.

Imaginary Companion Descriptive Interview Form—This form was prepared as a semi-structured interview form. A semi-structured interview is a data collection tool to better understand the participant's perspective. The prepared form is flexible and personal, based on open-ended questions. That is, it allows the researcher to design additional questions to explore the knowledge while giving the researcher autonomy to explore appropriate ideas that may arise during the interview [20]. The semi-structured interview facilitates the exchange of ideas between the interviewer and the interviewee, empowering the interviewer to change direction or ask questions. It allows the interviewer to explore their views and ideas and delve into their responses for additional information and clarification. Interviewers are free to change the words used. The words do not change the meaning of the questions, as they may have different meanings for different participants. The reliability of the questions in semi-structured interviews does not depend on the repetition of words but on the equivalence of their meanings. The answers can be standardized and compared as long as the interviewer can convey the same meaning to different interviewees [21,22]. Kallio, Piethylä, Johnson, and Kangasniemi conducted a semi-structured interview [23] proposed the following five stages: determining the prerequisites, using the previously obtained information, creating a semi-structured pre-interview form, piloting the prepared form, and presenting the completed semi-structured interview form. The research considered these five stages while preparing the interview form.

There are six questions in the interview form. These are as follows:

- What is the gender of your imaginary companion?
- What would you like your imaginary companion to look like?
- What might your imaginary companion be feeling?
- What might your imaginary companion be thinking right now?
- What are the characteristics of your imaginary companion that you like/dislike?
- What are the characteristics of your imaginary companion that you do not like/dislike?

Drawing Technique—This technique is widely used as a data collection method in education and psychology. This method enables children to reveal their feelings and thoughts through the pictures they draw symbolically [24]. The content and the quality of the lines in the pictures reveal the children themselves, the individuals they communicate with, and their perceptions of the individuals. In paintings, internal events and many experiences, emotions, and perceptions occur in a single visual expression [25]. In short, pictures are used to explore children's views and experiences. The advantages of using the painting technique in research with children are that they provide non-verbal expression, and children are active and creative when drawing. Many children are also familiar with painting activities and can change and add drawings as they wish [18]. The fact that preschool children are more active in drawing and express their feelings and thoughts more easily with pictures has been an essential factor in using this technique. The instruction "I want you to draw a picture of your imaginary companion" was used in this research.

2.4. Data Collection Process

Independent kindergartens were preferred for the collection of research data. In these schools, children with imaginary companions between 48–60 months were determined. In this process, children with imaginary companions were selected based on the answers given by parents, classroom teachers, and the children themselves. Interviews were conducted individually with each child since children in this age group can be influenced by the discourse of other friends and imitate the drawings of others [18]. For this reason, a suitable environment has been prepared away from sound and noise. During the interview, explanations were given to all children about the research. They were reminded to stop the interview any time and skip the questions they did not want to answer. The questions in

the interview form were asked of the children, and the researchers recorded the answers of the children. Children were supplemented with additional questions to encourage them to answer. Care was taken to ask questions in a comfortable atmosphere. The interviews lasted approximately 15–20 min. After the interviews, the children were asked to draw pictures of their imaginary companions and describe the pictures they drew. This technique in the study has been an essential factor since drawing is the visual data [18] that provides critical data about how children see events, phenomena, or situations.

2.5. Analysis of Data

The data collected in this study were analyzed according to content analysis, one of the techniques used in qualitative research methods. Content analysis provides a scientific method for evaluating data collected using a variety of qualitative research approaches, including focus groups, interviews, and ethnographic observations [26]. While conducting content analysis, Colaizzi's seven-step method was used. The Colaizzi method is a powerful and robust descriptive phenomenological approach and, thus, ensures the credibility and reliability of the results [27]. In this study, in the first step, the researchers read the children's answers several times to make sense of them and tried to become familiar with the data in this way. In the second step, the researchers tried to create concepts from the words or sentences obtained in the interviews. In the third step, they formulated the concepts they created in codes. The content formulated in the fourth step is grouped into categories. In the fifth step, the researchers wrote detailed and comprehensive explanations. The researchers revealed the basic structure based on the detailed explanations in the sixth step. Finally, in the seventh step, the researchers verified the basic structure. In addition to the answers the children gave, they also talked about the pictures they drew and confirmed that they reflected their feelings and thoughts fully and accurately [28,29].

2.6. Validity and Reliability of the Research

It is essential to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research. Suggested strategies were taken into account to ensure validity and reliability [30]. For this reason, the researchers recorded the interviews and transferred them to an online platform to ensure the research's credibility. While analyzing the answers, the codes and categories were neither too broad nor too narrow to exclude concepts. Relationships between themes and categories were modelled, and detailed descriptions were included. Pilot interviews were conducted with three children who were not included in the study. In order to ensure the validity of the research, the research process is explained in detail. In order to ensure consistency, one-to-one quotations are included in the findings section. The children's names are not included in the quotations and are indicated in codes. In addition, the data obtained from the children were coded by an experienced academician apart from the researchers. The encodings made by the researchers have been calculated with the Miles and Huberman formula (Reliability = Consensus/(Agreement + Disagreement)) [31]. The agreement between the coders was determined as 90%. The primary data source for the imaginary company in the study was supported by the secondary data source, which is the drawings. Thus, more robust interpretations were made using data diversity in the research. In short, the validity and reliability of the research were based on four factors (actual value, practicality, stability, and based on reality). The actual value is obtained by returning and obtaining participants' consent for the article. Before and after the interview, attempts were made to avoid any prejudices regarding the studied phenomenon, and this research was based on reality (Guba and Lincoln, as cited in [32]) (p. 78).

3. Results

The findings obtained from the research conducted to evaluate the discourses used by 48–60-month-old children to describe their imaginary companions in their paintings are presented in the following tables.

In the research, the children's answers to the question "What is the gender of your imaginary company?" were evaluated, and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of imaginary company by gender (n = 46).

Theme 1	Category	Code	*f*	%
Gender	Male	Veysi-Alper-Boy-Ömer	29	63.04
	Female	Ela-Sister-Cansu-Buğlem	17	36.95

According to Table 1, the answers to the question "What is the gender of your imaginary company?" were grouped into two categories. When the distribution of the expressions related to the question is examined, it is seen that f = 29 (63.04%) answered in the "Male" category, and f = 17 (36.95%) answered in the "Female" category. Below are children's statements and examples of pictures that support the finding. These are expressions and picture examples (Figure 1).

Category 1. "Female"

"My imaginary company's name is Buglem. I call it Buglem, so it is a girl." (C3)

Category 2. "Male"

"I have had an imaginary company for a long time. I have never changed his name. His name is Mithat. Mithats are men. He is wearing pants and a jacket." (C7)

C3　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　**C7**

Figure 1. The children drew sample illustrations.

In the research, the question "What would you like your imaginary company to look like?" was asked. The answers given to the question are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of imaginary company by appearance (n = 46).

Theme 2	Category	Code	*f*	%
Appearance Features	Clothing and accessory expressions	Shorts, short sleeves, hats, dresses, pants, watches, belts, earrings	35	43.75
	Expressions of liking	Sweet, handsome, good-looking, friendly, hairy, colourful	20	25.00
	Character expressions	Superman, clown, spiderman, zebra, dad, friend	11	13.75
	Body image expressions	Such as fat, thin, big, small, and huge	9	11.25
	Hygiene statements	Clean, bright, immaculate	5	6.25

In Table 2, the children's answers to the question "What would you like your imaginary company to look like?" was collected in five categories. When the expression distributions

are examined, f = 35 (43.75%) of them are "Clothing and accessories", f = 20 (25.00%) are "Liked", and f = 11 (13.75%) are "Character". It is seen that f = 9 (11.25%) responded in the "Body image" category and f = 5 (6.25%) in the "Hygiene" category. The children's statements supporting the finding and examples of pictures are given below.

These expressions and picture examples are as follows (Figure 2).

Category 1. "Clothing and accessory statements."

"I wanted my imaginary company to wear a rainbow dress. Every time it rained, we went out together." (C14)

Category 2. "Phrases of liking"

"She will have straight hair, very long and blonde hair. Moreover, she is wearing tights and a bodysuit, also pink. It also has a pink buckle. I would not say I like her running fast. She constantly moves his feet. Her legs are long." (C33)

Category 3. "Character expressions."

"I wish my friend were like Spider-Man. He could go just about anywhere. I would travel with him, and he would carry me too." (C17)

Category 4. "Expressions of body image."

"I wish I had a big friend. Maybe the people around him were a little afraid of him because he was huge, but whatever." (C41)

Category 5. "Hygiene statements"

"I would like my friend to be very clean. Because I am always very clean too." (C11)

C14   **C33**

Figure 2. The children drew sample illustrations.

In the research, the views on the question "How might your imaginary company be feeling?" are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of imaginary company by mood characteristics (n = 46).

Theme 3	Category	Code	f	%
Mood Traits	Expressions of happiness	Laughing, rejoicing, happy, cheerful	38	61.29
	Expressions of unhappiness	Sad, crying, angry, mad, worried	24	38.70

According to Table 3, the children's answers to the question "How might your imaginary company be feeling?" were grouped into two categories. When the expression distributions related to the question were examined, it was seen that f = 38 (61.29%) answered in the "Happiness" category, and f = 24 (38.70%) answered in the "Unhappiness" category. Below are the expressions of the children and examples of pictures. These expressions and picture examples are as follows (Figure 3).

Category 1. "Emotions of happiness."
"She likes yellow because she has a yellow dress. My friend is pleased." (C36)
Category 2. "Expressions of unhappiness"
"My friend is upset, so he dressed in black. He has friends with him. Someone is distraught, but no one thinks of him. He is just sad. He does not know what to do. (C44)

C36   **C44**

Figure 3. The children drew sample illustrations.

In the research, the expressions related to the question "What might your imaginary company be thinking right now?" are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of imaginary companions by thinking status (n = 46).

Theme 4	Category	Code	*f*	%
	Phrases for fun/game	Such as playing with friends, father, chick, car, rolling downhill	25	34.72
	Expressions for hobbies	Such as making a cake, going to a football game, painting, skating	18	25
State of Thinking	Statements about expectations	Such as having a house, nice weather, many siblings, living a good life, and wanting to grow up as soon as possible	12	16.66
	Expressions for individuals	Such as your friend, yourself, your teacher, or someone valuable	9	12.5
	Expressions about emotions	How is happiness? Does my mother love me or not? Being sad or angry with a friend	5	6.94
	Expressions of not thinking about anything	It is like she/he does not want to think	3	4.16

According to Table 4, the children's answers to the question "What might your imaginary company be thinking right now?" were collected in six categories. When the distribution of the expressions related to the question is analyzed, f = 25 (34.72%) is for "Entertainment/Game", f = 18 (25.00%) is for "hobbies", f = 12 (16.66%) is "For expectations", f = 9 (12.5%) is for "Individuals", f = 5 (6.94%) is for "Emotions" and f = 3 (4.16%) is for "he/she did not think about anything". Below are the expressions of the children and examples of pictures. These expressions and picture examples are as follows (Figure 4).
Category 1. "Fun/Game-oriented expressions."
"My friend currently wants to play with his friends as soon as possible. His friends will come, and the ones he loves the most." (C8)
Category 2. "Phrases for hobbies"
"He wants to paint a picture of his favourite bunny as soon as possible. She dressed her in her favourite green colour dress. Bunny loves carrots the most. An adorable and soft rabbit" (C23)

Category 3. "Statements about expectations."
"My friend thinks a lot that he wished he had more siblings. I do not have any siblings, but Alp has two siblings. One is smaller than me, the other is bigger." (C38)
Category 4. "Statements directed at individuals."
"My friend thinks of his teacher the most. He loves his teacher very much. Because his teacher is playing games with him." (C9)
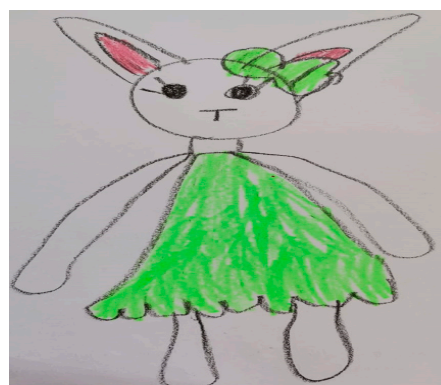*Category 5. "Emotional expressions"*
"She is wondering whether her mother loves her or not. I think her mom loves her when she is not misbehaving." (C30)
Category 6. "Statements that they did not think about anything"
"My friend is not thinking of anything." (C21)

C8   **C23**

Figure 4. The children drew sample illustrations.

In the research, statements related to the question "What are the characteristics of your imaginary company that you like/like?" are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of imaginary company by favourite/admired characteristics (n = 46).

Theme 5	Category	Code	f	%
Favourite/Liked Features	Expressions about communication skills	Such as making good friends, playing games with me, and staying at home as a guest.	25	36.23
	Statements about positive behavioral traits	Never lies, likes to share, clever, not rude, is happy	19	27.53
	Statements about physical characteristics	Being beautiful, wearing a ribbon, wearing a dress, and having curly hair	15	21.73
	Expressions about having hobbies	Painting, ballet, supporting a team, and loving animals	10	14.40

Table 5 shows the children's answers to the question "What are the characteristics of your imaginary companion that you like/admire?" were grouped into four categories. When the distribution of the expressions are examined, f = 25 (36.23%) for "Communication skills", f = 19 (27.53%) for "Positive behaviour characteristics", f = 15 (21.73%) for "Their physical characteristics", and f = 10 (14.40%) for "Having hobbies". Below are the expressions of the children and examples of pictures. These expressions and picture examples are as follows (Figure 5).
Category 1. "Statements about communication skills."
"My favourite feature of my friend is that he plays with me, whenever I want. Sometimes we can play outside and sometimes at home, so always. He never fights with his friends." (C19)
Category 2. "Statements about positive behaviour traits"

"I like that my friend is always happy. Then we play outstanding games. And it never breaks my toys." (C3)

Category 3. "Statements about physical characteristics."

"I love my friend's decoration. She wears colourful ribbons every day, depending on the colour of her dress. She also likes to paint and play games with her friends in the park." (C22)

Category 4. "Statements about having hobbies."

"I love my friend's painting since I also love to paint with my crayons." (C11)

| C19 | C22 |

Figure 5. The children drew sample illustrations.

In the last theme, statements related to the question "What are the features of your imaginary companion that you do not like/dislike?" are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Distribution of imaginary companion by Dislike/Unadmirable Characteristics (n = 46).

Theme 6	Category	Code	*f*	%
Dislikes/Unadmirable Features	Statements about negative behavioral traits	Using bad words, shouting, scratching, making fun of me, breaking toys, did not know how to share, and fought	29	43.93
	Expressions about communication skills	Not doing what I say, not playing games with me	17	27.75
	Statements about being unhealthy	Eating little, not taking a bath, not washing his/her face	10	15.15
	Expressions about not having a disliked feature	I love everything about her; she is like an exceptional friend	6	9.09
	Statements about physical characteristics	Such as dressing ugly, not combing her hair at all, having big ears	4	6.06

According to Table 6, the answers to the question "What are the characteristics of your imaginary companion that you dislike/dislike?" were collected in five categories. When the distribution of the expressions are examined, f = 29 (43.93%) for "Negative behaviour characteristics", f = 17 (27.75%) for "Communication skills", f = 10 (15.15%) for "Being Healthy" f = 6 (9.09%) for "Not having a feature that they dislike", and f = 14 (6.06%) for "Related to their physical characteristics". Below are the expressions of the children and examples of pictures. These expressions and picture examples are as follows (Figure 6).

Category 1. "Statements about negative behaviour characteristics."

"My friend sometimes yells a lot and throws toys around. That is why I do not like him sometimes. (C10)

Category 2. "Statements about communication skills"

"My friend has friends too. Sometimes he does not want to play games with me when he sees them. I do not like his friends because they make me sad. Moreover, I do not want it to roll over. Because it collides while doing somersaults." (C35)

Category 3. "Statements about being unhealthy."

"Every morning I tell him to wash his face, but it pisses me off when he does not. I do not like this feature." (C26)

Category 4. "Statements about not having a disliked feature."

"Why should it be the feature that I dislike? She is a special friend of mine. She is always by my side. I love everything." (C5)

Category 5. "Statements about physical characteristics"

"I do not like my friend's ears. Because his ears are big, I mean pretty big." (C13)

C10   C35

Figure 6. The children drew sample illustrations.

4. Discussion

The preschool period is a developmental process in which the child defines himself/herself and his/her environment through games. In this process, although children usually play games with a real friend, sometimes imaginary companions appear as a situation observed in children's games. Therefore, a form of childhood fantasy is an imaginary company [5]. Imaginary company has long been an essential asset in children's lives. It is stated that about half of preschool children play with imaginary companions [33]. For this reason, the evaluation of the discourses used by 48–60-month-old children to describe their imaginary companions in their paintings was discussed in the study.

In the study, children were asked about the gender of their imaginary companions, and most of the children's answer was male. When the relevant literature is examined, it is stated that boys almost always create same-sex friends, while girls are likelier to have imaginary companions of the opposite sex [34]. In this respect, considering that boys almost always create same-sex friends and girls create only slightly more girlfriends than boys, it is natural that most children's imaginary companions are boys [4], and 13% of boys have imaginary companions of the opposite sex [17]. Again, some studies report that children often choose an imaginary companion of the same sex, and girls sometimes choose an imaginary male companion. In contrast, boys do not choose an imaginary female companion [35]. These differences may reflect social and cultural expectations regarding gender. They may indicate that parents require greater adherence to gender role stereotypes in men and exhibit greater tolerance of gender choices and behaviors in women [36]. In addition, it is seen that the number of girls included in the study is slightly higher than that of boys. Considering this situation, namely the fact that boys form imaginary companions more of the same sex and girls form imaginary companions of the opposite sex, it can be thought that it is natural that the ratio of men is higher.

Another question within the scope of the research is how children want their imaginary companions to look. When the answers given were evaluated, they included expressions in clothing and accessories, admiration, character, body image, and hygiene. It is seen that

it is mainly concentrated on clothing and accessories. In a study, it was revealed that while defining the demographic characteristics of children's imaginary companions, they also made definitions of their physical characteristics. The most interesting of the descriptions is that these children's imaginary companions reflect their physical appearance. Although not all children in this sample have imaginary companions that reflect their particular demographic characteristics, in other examples of imaginary companions, it has been revealed that children create companions who fit their characteristics. Children create imaginary companions with similar characteristics because, when choosing them, they can choose based on similarities to their real friends [6,37]. Again, studies show that children consider these friends as important as their relationships with real friends and attribute similar qualities of their friends to their imaginary companions [38]. In another study, mothers of children with imaginary companions were asked whether their friends had physical characteristics related to their imaginary companions. With the examples they gave, mothers associated their children with characteristics related to themselves and their immediate surroundings. In other words, the mothers stated that the physical characteristics of their children's imaginary companions are similar to their children's and are related to the living elements of the children [4]. Thus, although children are the creators of their imaginary companions, they use a similar process for choosing real friendships when creating their friends. When evaluated from this point of view, the individuals around the children have the characteristics in the categories. Having things in common with the imaginary companion can make it easier to relate to and identify with the imaginary companion.

Another research question was, "How might your imaginary companion feel?" The answers consisted of expressions of happiness and unhappiness when divided into categories. In addition to using expressions representing happiness, such as joy, children also used expressions representing unhappiness, such as anger, nervousness, and worry. Children can ascribe various moods to their imaginary companions because children can reflect their feelings through them. Majors mentions in his research that the occasional hostile behaviour of imaginary companions enables the child to express and cope with angry or sad feelings [3]. He also stated that communicating with children's imaginary companions helped relieve their angry or sad feelings. It is stated that children's interactions with their imaginary companions are sometimes related to events or problems. They help them express their feelings and discover personal problems that seem to bring relief [3]. From this point of view, children may have common feelings with their imaginary companions. Therefore, the similarities a child perceives with their imaginary companion can be a way to develop a connection and friendship with them while also helping them feel that their imaginary companion understands them.

In the research, the question "What are the characteristics of your imaginary companion that you like or like?" has been asked. The statements given were collected in categories such as communication skills, positive behaviour characteristics, physical characteristics, and hobbies. Majors stated in his study that all children's imaginary companions are good friends. They like to play with them, and, in some cases, they see them as people with whom they will share their secrets. In addition, the children in the study also used different positive statements about their imaginary companions [3]. They referred not only to the supportive elements but also to the characteristics they valued, the fun, gameplay, and friendship elements of interactions with imaginary companions. In this study, children mainly stated that their favourite feature is imaginary companions playing with them since playing is a developmental phenomenon in learning, cooperation, and socialization. Playing with their imaginary companions can help them fulfil some of the developmental tasks of middle childhood [3,39]. In this way, starting from their games, children may use their favourite features in their interaction with their imaginary companions, sometimes to cope with the situations they encounter in real life and sometimes to fulfil their wishes.

Finally, children were asked about their imaginary companions' disliked or unadmirable features. When the answers were examined, the children used expressions in

categories, such as negative behaviour characteristics, communication skills, being unhealthy, and physical characteristics. A few children stated that their imaginary companions did not have a characteristic they did not like. In the relevant literature and research, there are comments about the more negative aspects of some imaginary companions. In the study of Mathur and Smith, children stated that their imaginary companions had rude and annoying behaviors [37]. In their research, Taylor and Carlson reported that 3% of imaginary companions are categorized as invisible enemies, mostly scary or evil [36]. Again, Hoff classified the effect of the imaginary companion as good or bad in his research. Hoff uses a psychodynamic interpretation to explain this situation. According to him, the child who internalizes the rules of behaviour can use imaginary companions to "empty unacceptable impulses". At the same time, Hoff sees these events as part of developing autonomy and following internalized parental expectations. He argues that imaginary companions act as a "bridge to reality" and that children can try behaviors related to events in their lives or overcome emotions, Hoff as cited in [36] (p. 5). At this point, children can convey the impulses they cannot accept. For example, their imaginary companion needs to learn how to share. They have stated that they do not share with anyone and only play with the toy one of their friends brought on the toy day) through their imaginary companions. The explanations are given to support the answers given by the children.

Given all this information, asking children directly about their imaginary companions was the best way to evaluate children. The answers given by the children in this process showed that they could produce detailed descriptions of their imaginary companions.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

The study aimed to explore the perceptions and feelings of children toward their imaginary companions. For this purpose, six themes and 24 categories were created. In the first theme, it is stated that the gender of their imaginary companions is primarily male. In contrast, in the second theme, appearance features are more concentrated in the category that includes clothing and accessories. In the third theme, in the category of happiness in terms of mood features, considering the thinking status of their imaginary companions in the fourth theme, it was determined that they concentrated on the category of fun/games. The fifth theme is in the communication skills category regarding liked/admirable features, and, finally, in the harmful behaviour category, the sixth theme is disliked/unadmirable features. In addition, the scope and characteristics of the imaginary companions that children have, how they interact with them, and how these interactions are sometimes related to the events in their lives are discussed within the scope of these themes. In this context, it has been investigated how imaginary companions take their place in the lives of preschool children. Although the goals set are varied, the characteristics of imaginary companions in children's lives are emphasized.

The study tried to explore the different characteristics of children's imaginary companions with a small sample size. A larger sample may allow a wider variety of objectives to be identified. The sample size can be increased as well as diversified. Data in the study were obtained only from children, and studies including parent and teacher observations can be made. In this way, parent or teacher reports about children's imaginary companions can illuminate for many reasons, especially considering the difficulty of obtaining reliable reports from young children. In addition, although attempts were made to create data diversity in the research, different tools, such as interview techniques, drama, and child photos, can be used. It is stated in the relevant literature that there is a need to compare the characteristics of imaginary companions in normative and specific clinical examples. In other words, including the psychopathological part of the subject discussed in the research may suggest interdisciplinary studies. In addition, comparative studies can be made by collecting qualitative and quantitative data from children with and without imaginary companions.

When evaluating the findings of this study, they should be interpreted in light of some of the limitations. Since this study was conducted with a qualitative research methodology,

the inability to generalize the results is one of the main limitations. The second is that the age groups of the children in the study group are small. Another limitation is that drawing and interviewing in data collection is time-consuming. Considering these limitations, similar studies can be conducted with different data collection tools. In particular, it is essential to conduct similar studies with probability-based sampling to obtain more generalizable data. Learning about the phenomenon of imaginary friends children can be considered a supporting factor in developing educational content for them.

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