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AN EXAMINATION OF CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF MONSTERS FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE DRAW-A-MONSTER TASK

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Abstract

Children encounter the concept of monsters at an early age through literary works, media, and similar sources. In the literature, monsters are frequently used to explore children's fears and their perceptions of reality and fantasy. This study aimed to examine the monster perceptions of 20 children aged 66–84 months through drawings. The research was conducted as a qualitative case study. The draw-and-tell method was selected as a developmentally appropriate data collection technique. Accordingly, the children's drawings and their verbal explanations of these drawings were used as data. The data were analyzed through content analysis. The findings indicated that most children perceived monsters as imaginary and predominantly male. The names assigned to monsters were also influenced by children's everyday experiences and media exposure. In addition, children attributed both positive and negative characteristics to monsters, and most of the depicted monsters were embedded within a story. Overall, the findings suggest that children construct the monster figure in diverse ways through cultural imagery, imagination, and social-emotional themes, demonstrating the potential of the "draw a monster" task as an exploratory tool. The results were discussed in relation to child development and gender roles.

Keywords: early childhood education, monster, perception, drawing, draw-and-tell technique

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the Turkish word "canavar" derives from the Persian term "cānvar", which is formed by combining the noun "cān", meaning "spirit, life, or vitality," with the suffix "-var", denoting "having" or "possessing" (Aksan, 1978, as cited in Sav, 2003; Güngör & Soysal, 2020). In its original Persian usage, the word carried no malevolent connotations and referred broadly to "a living creature," "a being endowed with life," or "any kind of animal." However, as it entered Turkish and assumed the phonological form "canavar" in accordance with vowel harmony, it underwent a substantial process of semantic narrowing and pejoration (Aksan, 1978, as cited in Sav, 2003). Its initially neutral meaning of "every living being" gradually shifted toward the more restricted sense of a "wild, predatory, and harmful creature" or "wolf" that threatened settled communities. As a cultural phenomenon, the monster is not merely a product of fantasy. As Cohen (1996) argues in his "seven theses," the monster always possesses a "cultural body"; in other words, it embodies the historical moment, geographical setting, and social crises in which it emerges. Monsters function as meaning-producing constructs designed to reinforce the normative boundaries of society. They embody both radical otherness and the forbidden desires that human beings repress within the deeper layers of the self (Mercil, 2022; Ümer, 2021). Tepegöz, one of the most distinctive monster archetypes in Turkish mythology, may be interpreted within this framework as the corporeal manifestation of moral

transgression and as a punishment imposed upon society following the violation of the boundary between rational social order and uncontrolled nature. The concept of the monster therefore represents not only the linguistic expression of humanity's defensive relationship with the external world but also a pedagogical mirror through which culture interrogates its own boundaries, fears, and perceptions of the "other" (Kaval, 2025; Taflı Düzgün, 2009; Yurtseven, 2025). The idea of the monster has occupied a place in human life since ancient times. Nevertheless, such figures have not always appeared explicitly under the designation of "monster"; they have also been represented as giants, old hags, subterranean demons, serpents, and similar supernatural beings (Taflı Düzgün, 2009; Avcı & Korkmaz, 2019). The monster motif has been frequently addressed in both historical and contemporary works, including the stories of Dede Korkut and Beowulf, as well as Tomris Uyar's retelling of Şahmeran (Şahin Yeşil, 2015). In these narratives, the monster is generally portrayed as a being that threatens or harms society, while simultaneously serving as an essential narrative device through which the central character is enabled to demonstrate heroism. Today, numerous storybooks and collections of fairy tales featuring monsters are readily available. In addition to literary narratives, children encounter diverse representations of monsters across a wide range of media and cultural products, including animated films, digital games, and toys. Within this contemporary context, the monster has become a more tangible and familiar figure embedded in everyday life. Although it may still be represented in its conventional frightening form, it is increasingly depicted as humorous, entertaining, or endearing in order to attract children's attention and sustain their engagement with the narrative.

Children's fantasies about monsters constitute a normal aspect of childhood development. Through children's literature, cartoons, and educational materials addressing topics such as germs, children acquire considerable knowledge about the characteristics of monsters and develop various experiences related to them (Taylor, 2010; Milandri, 2004). Children's encounters with monsters begin at approximately two to three years of age, when they start to understand the relationship between mental representations of objects and their physical counterparts (Bettelheim, 1976). At around the age of three, children may confuse their dreams with reality. Because of their limited life experiences, they may be unable to evaluate mental images in accordance with reality. Their ability to distinguish between animate and inanimate entities may also remain underdeveloped. Children may sometimes believe that toys or even all objects are alive (Öztürk & Tulum, 2021). A large proportion of preschool children experience monster-related fears associated with darkness, bedtime, being alone, and frightening dreams, or directly and frequently experience a fear of monsters (Kushnir et al., 2014; Kushnir & Sadeh, 2012; Muris et al., 2000; Zisenwine et al., 2013). Harris et al. (1991) concluded that, from the age of four onward, children are capable of making a clear distinction between imaginary and real entities. The same study found that children around the age of four were reluctant to remain alone with boxes they believed contained monsters, whereas older children did not display similar fear. Contrary to this finding, evidence also suggests that children's fears of monsters may increase during the early years of schooling as their imaginative capacities develop (Muris et al., 2003). Beyond this age range, fears associated with supernatural beings and imaginary worlds may nevertheless continue to emerge. Although individual differences exist, the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy may, in some cases, continue developing until early adolescence. Despite the widespread view that children between the ages of four and five begin to distinguish between the real and imaginary dimensions of the monster concept (Harris et al., 1991; Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2009), any universal claim concerning children's understanding of fantasy and reality may be inaccurate or misleading, as this understanding is shaped by a wide range of factors, including culture and experience (Taylor, 1997).

The pervasive presence of monsters in children's psyches may constitute a concrete manifestation of fears and anxieties that can be experienced as threatening. From this perspective, the monster image serves as an appropriate metaphor for common childhood fears and experiences such as separation anxiety, death, injury, illness, and helplessness (Bettelheim, 1976; Oelman, 1974). However, monsters do not merely represent children's most profound fears. They may also function as metaphors for

power and desire, sympathy, control over one's own life, and the impulse to transgress prohibitions (Cohen, 1996, as cited in Taylor, 2010). In this respect, children's drawings of monsters may possess a projective quality. Through the projective potential of children's drawings, they may be able to express their perceptions, emotions, relational representations, and the meanings they attribute to their experiences in an indirect manner (Koppitz, 1983; Malchiodi, 1998). Particularly during early childhood, when verbal expressive abilities have not yet fully developed, drawings, story-completion activities, and thematic narratives may be useful for facilitating communication with children and for developing interpretive hypotheses regarding their fears, interests, self-perceptions, and family relationships (Santillo et al., 2025; Skybo et al., 2007). For example, findings obtained from the Draw-a-Cactus Test indicate that participants were most frequently associated with characteristics such as domesticity, dependence on family, a lack of belonging, and being cheerful and optimistic, whereas extraversion and negative or depressive mood states were observed at lower rates (Coşar & Demir, 2024). Nevertheless, interpretations that directly associate individual drawing features with specific personality patterns, emotional difficulties, traumatic experiences, or cognitive characteristics often have limited reliability and validity (Joiner et al., 1996; Lilienfeld et al., 2000; Thomas & Jolley, 1998). In addition, the word "monster" itself may generate concern among educators, families, parents, and communities affiliated with political or religious institutions, as it may be regarded as threatening or disturbing for children. Contrary to such concerns, however, evidence suggests that materials containing monsters may contribute to children's management of fear and the enrichment of their emotional experiences. Appropriately structured content may support children in expressing and naming their emotions, regulating emotional responses, coping with fears, and developing morally (Taylor, 2010). Toward the end of the preoperational period, as children become increasingly capable of distinguishing reality from fantasy, their perception of monsters gradually shifts away from that of a genuine threat and toward the domains of fiction, humor, and symbolic representation (Bauer, 1976; Gullone, 2000; Muris et al., 2003). The international literature indicates that studies concerning monsters have primarily focused on examining children's fears, determining whether children can distinguish between reality and fantasy, and enhancing children's courage (Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2008, 2009). In Türkiye, however, the subject has predominantly been addressed through textual and representational analyses. Bulut (2017) examined the relationships among child protagonists, monsters, and mother figures in two films within the conceptual frameworks of otherness and abjection, whereas Kartal (2004) investigated representations of monsters in illustrated children's books. A review of the literature revealed no study directly investigating children's perceptions of the concept of the monster. Furthermore, how children depict imaginary beings such as monsters, which characteristics they attribute to them, and through which narratives they make sense of these beings remain insufficiently understood. Therefore, examining children's perceptions of monsters through their drawings and narratives may contribute to a more holistic understanding of how they interpret fear, reality, power, difference, and socially constructed meanings. Within this context, the aim of the present study was to identify children's perceptions of monsters. In line with this aim, the following research questions were addressed:

- What genders and names do children attribute to monsters?
- How do children evaluate the reality status of monsters?
- What physical, emotional, and behavioral characteristics do children attribute to monsters?
- What characteristics and patterns emerge in children's monster drawings and their narratives about these drawings?

METHOD

Research Model

The study was designed using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is an approach aimed at exploring and understanding the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to a social or

human problem (Creswell, 2017). A case study, one of the qualitative research designs, was employed in the present study. Case study research involves describing individuals' experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding a particular case as defined by the participants (Patton, 2014; Creswell, 2017). Because the present study aimed to describe children's perceptions of the concept of monsters, the case study method was selected as the most appropriate qualitative research design.

Study Group

The study group consisted of 20 children aged 66–84 months. Purposive sampling was used to determine the study group. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants according to specific criteria on the basis of their capacity to provide rich and detailed information relevant to the purpose of the research (Palinkas et al., 2015). Accordingly, the study included children who had reached a developmental level that enabled them to express their views about the concept of monsters verbally, produce drawings, and participate voluntarily in the research. Parental permission was obtained before the children participated in the study, and the children's willingness to participate was also taken into consideration. To ensure a balanced distribution by gender, the study group included 10 girls and 10 boys. Eleven of the children had previously attended a preschool education institution, whereas nine had no prior preschool education experience. The decision to include children aged 66–84 months was influenced by the fact that children begin to establish a clearer distinction between fantasy and reality during this developmental period. Research indicates that the ability to distinguish reality from fiction develops with age during early childhood and that, toward the end of the preschool period, children are able to make more consistent judgments regarding the reality status of imaginary beings (Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Woolley & Ghossainy, 2013). Nevertheless, when emotionally charged or fear-related imaginary beings such as monsters are involved, children may not always evaluate the boundary between reality and fantasy with the same degree of certainty (Harris et al., 1991). Therefore, this age range was selected because it represents a developmental period in which children may regard monsters as imaginary beings while simultaneously attributing to them characteristics associated with real life on the basis of their personal fears, experiences, and environmental influences. These characteristics of the study group enabled children's perceptions of monsters to be examined from multiple perspectives through their drawings and narratives about those drawings.

Data Collection Instruments

Children's drawings and a semi-structured question form developed by the researchers were used as data collection tools in the study. The draw-and-tell technique was employed to reveal children's perceptions of monsters not only through their verbal statements but also through their drawings and the meanings they attributed to those drawings. Draw-and-tell is a child-centered data collection approach in which children first produce a drawing on a particular topic and then explain it in their own words. In this approach, drawing is used as a means of communication that facilitates the interview process and enables children to describe their experiences (Driessnack, 2006). The combined use of drawing and conversation helps reduce the limitations that young children may experience when expressing their thoughts solely through direct questions and enables them to communicate through multiple modes of expression (Clark & Moss, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2007).

The semi-structured question form used in conjunction with the drawings was developed by the researchers in accordance with the relevant literature and the purpose of the study. The form included personal information such as the child's gender and whether the child had previously attended a preschool education institution. It also contained questions intended to elicit the name assigned to the monster, the monster's gender, the child's views regarding whether monsters exist in reality, the distinctive characteristics of the depicted monster, and the story constructed in relation to the drawing. Experts in preschool education and child development were consulted to evaluate whether the questions were appropriate for the children's developmental level and aligned with the purpose of the study, as well as whether they were sufficiently clear and comprehensible. In accordance with the experts' feedback, statements that were lengthy, leading, or potentially difficult for children to understand were simplified, and the form was finalized. In the present study, children's drawings were

not used as a projective test or a diagnostic assessment instrument; rather, they were treated as a data collection tool that facilitated children's expression and interpretation of their ideas about monsters. Therefore, no psychological, personality-related, or clinical meanings were attributed to the visual elements in the drawings independently of the children's own explanations.

Data Collection

The data were collected in an environment where the children could feel safe and comfortable and where potentially distracting stimuli were minimized as much as possible. Before the implementation began, the general purpose of the study was explained to the children in a manner appropriate to their age and developmental level. They were informed that the activity was not a test and that there were no right or wrong drawings or answers. A brief introductory and ice-breaking activity was conducted to help the children become familiar with the researcher and the setting. In this way, an effort was made to ensure that the children felt comfortable throughout the process. The children were then provided with a sheet of drawing paper and colored pencils and were given the instruction, "Can you draw a picture of a monster?" No guidance was provided regarding how the monster should be drawn, and no time limit was imposed. To prevent the children from copying one another, the interviews and drawing activities were conducted individually. After each child had completed the drawing, the second stage began, during which the questions included in the semi-structured question form were asked orally. Throughout the interview, the children were allowed to point to elements in their drawings, speak with reference to their drawings, and continue their narratives in any order they preferred. Children who provided brief responses were not pressured to elaborate, and remaining silent or choosing not to answer a question was regarded as a natural part of the process.

Data Analysis

Inductive content analysis was used to analyze the data. Content analysis is a systematic analytical process that involves organizing and coding data and grouping similar meanings under higher-order categories (Creswell, 2017). During the analysis process, the children's drawings, their responses to the questions, and the stories they narrated about their drawings were examined together. The data were read several times, and meaningful elements that attracted attention in the drawings or narratives were coded. Codes conveying similar meanings were grouped to form categories, and the findings were organized by considering the relationships among these categories. In analyzing the drawings, attention was paid to whether the depicted figure resembled a human, an animal, or an imaginary being; its physical characteristics and colors; elements associated with aggression or protection; and the characteristics attributed to the monster by the child. However, the elements included in the drawings were not evaluated solely on the basis of the researchers' visual interpretations; the children's own explanations of their drawings and the stories they constructed were also incorporated into the analysis. No psychological, personality-related, or clinical meanings were attributed to the forms, colors, or features of the figures independently of the children's own explanations. Thus, care was taken to avoid imposing meanings on the drawings that were not supported by the children's statements. To protect the confidentiality of the children's identities, each participant was assigned a code, and the children were numbered as C1, C2, C3, and so forth. The children's drawings, semi-structured question forms, and narratives concerning their drawings were matched using the same participant codes.

RESULTS

In this section, the findings concerning how children defined monsters and the characteristics of their monster drawings and related stories are presented under two subheadings.

Findings Concerning Children's Definitions of Monsters

Under this subheading, the children's views regarding the gender of the monster, the names they assigned to it, whether they believed monsters existed in reality, and the positive and negative characteristics they attributed to monsters are presented sequentially.

The results of the analysis regarding "distribution of children's views on the gender of the monster" are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of children's views regarding the gender of the monster

Gender of the Children	Identified the Monster as Female	Identified the Monster as Male	Total
Girls	5	5	10
Boys	0	10	10
Total	5	15	20

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the children described the monsters they had drawn as male. Of the 20 children, 15 (75%) stated that their monster was male, whereas five (25%) identified their monster as female. All of the boys described the monsters they had drawn as male. Among the girls, five identified their monsters as female, while the remaining five described them as male. Accordingly, the tendency to attribute a male gender to monsters was more prevalent both across the overall study group and, in particular, among the boys.

The results of the analysis regarding "the distribution of the names children assigned to their monsters" are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of the names children assigned to their monsters

Names	n	Names	n
Zombi	4	Salyangoz	1
Popi	2	Dabbe	1
Huysuz	1	Serçin	1
Ozimice Hindi	1	Aleks	1
Canbi	1	Cadı	1
Leyla	1	Asmin Ceren Selin	1
Tonton	1	Andırbula	1
Savvaror	1	Melek	1
Total			20

As shown in Table 2, the children assigned largely different names to the monsters they had drawn. The most frequently used name was "Zombi" which was preferred by four children. The name "Popi" was used by two children, whereas each of the remaining names was mentioned by only one child. In addition to names evoking fantastic characters, the children used human names, animal names, and original names of their own creation. This finding indicates that the children drew on a variety of words and associations when naming their monsters.

The results of the analysis regarding children's views on whether monsters exist are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Distribution of children's views regarding whether monsters exist

Variable	n	%
Stated that monsters exist	1	5
Stated that monsters do not exist	19	95
Total	20	100

As shown in Table 3, the vast majority of the children believed that monsters do not exist in reality. While 95% of the children stated that monsters were not real, only one child (5%) expressed the view that monsters existed. This finding indicates that most of the children were able to regard monsters not as real beings but as imaginary or fictional characters. In this context, one child stated, "Monsters do not really exist, but we see them in cartoons" (C1). Nevertheless, the fact that one child believed that monsters existed suggests that children may differ in their perceptions when distinguishing between reality and imaginary elements.

The results of the analysis regarding "children's views on the characteristics of monsters" are presented in Table 4.

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Table 4. Distribution of children's views regarding the characteristics of monsters

Characteristics	Descriptions	n	%
Positive	Singing, making friends, being cute	4	20
Negative	Hitting, eating, frightening, causing harm	16	80
Total		20	100

As shown in Table 4, 80% of the children attributed negative characteristics to monsters, whereas 20% attributed positive characteristics. Examples of the children's statements regarding the negative characteristics of monsters are presented below:

C1: "This monster does not like anyone."

C7: "The monster he drew is strong and wild."

C8: "This monster can stick you to the wall and eats people."

C10: "It is cruel, its eyes are red, everyone is afraid of the monster, the monster eats everyone, and it also eats animals."

Examples of the children's statements regarding the positive characteristics of monsters are as follows:

C12: "It really likes singing."

C20: "Singing."

These findings regarding the characteristics of monsters indicate that the majority of the children defined monsters in negative terms. Eighty percent of the children described monsters as unloving, wild, powerful, frightening, and capable of harming both humans and animals. This finding suggests that the children predominantly associated the concept of the monster with danger, fear, and aggression. In particular, statements such as "it eats people," "it frightens everyone," and "it has wild characteristics" indicate that the children perceived monsters as imaginary characters that pose a threat. By contrast, 20% of the children attributed positive characteristics to monsters by describing them as characters that enjoyed singing. This finding demonstrates that some children perceived the monster image not only as frightening but also as a character capable of possessing entertaining and endearing qualities.

Findings Concerning Children's Monster Drawings and Narratives

This section presents the children's monster drawings and their narratives about these drawings. Within this context, the children described the characteristics of the monsters they had drawn and narrated a story about them.

The analysis results regarding "distribution of children's monster drawings" are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of children's monster drawings

Variable	n	%
Humanoid figure with unusual characteristics	7	35
Human figure	5	25
Animal figure	5	25
Other (e.g., a box)	3	15
Total	20	100

As shown in Table 5, the children's monster drawings were categorized as humanoid figures with unusual characteristics, human figures, animal figures, and other forms. The largest proportion of the children depicted monsters as humanoid figures with unusual characteristics (35%). These unusual characteristics included having four hands, a spiked body, or extremely large teeth. This category was followed by drawings in which monsters were represented as human figures (25%). In these drawings, the children depicted monsters as resembling ordinary human beings with hands, arms, feet, and legs. Some children also depicted monsters as resembling animals (25%). In these drawings, the monsters

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were portrayed with features resembling animals such as dinosaurs and mice. Finally, 15% of the children produced monster drawings that resembled neither humans nor animals. These drawings included figures with characteristics such as a single eye or several feet. Examples of these drawings and the children's corresponding narratives are presented below.



Figure 1. Student drawing of a monster 1

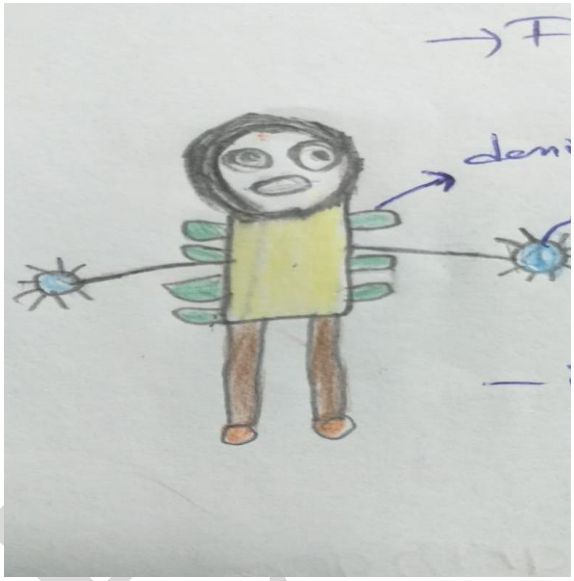


Figure 2. Student drawing of a monster 2

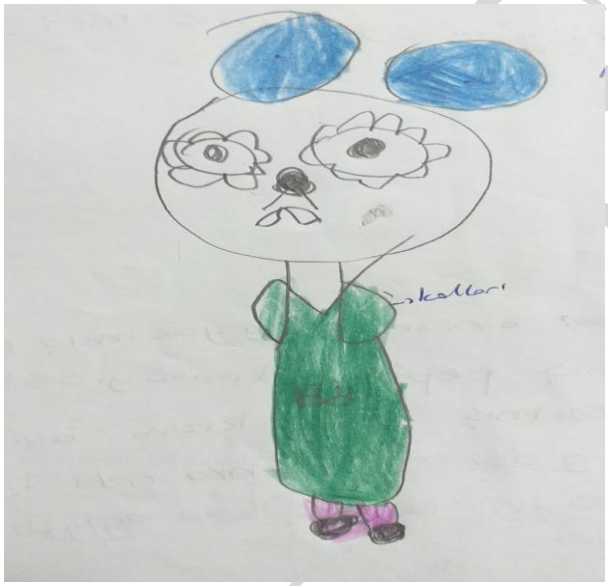


Figure 3. Student drawing of a monster 3



Figure 4. Student drawing of a monster 4

Figure 1 was drawn by a boy. The monster was depicted as resembling a human, and its most distinctive characteristic was described as singing and greatly enjoying singing. The monster was identified as male and named the Canbi Monster. The child described the drawing as follows: "The monster was walking alone along the road and was very frightened. Then he walked to the right. Just at that moment, he saw a person and became friends with that person. Then he saw another monster. The monster was very small and very cute." An examination of the drawing indicated that the monster was depicted in human form and attributed a human-specific characteristic, namely singing. The child also described the monster as small and cute.

Figure 2, drawn by a boy, depicts a grass-eating monster holding balls in its hands that it uses to break bones. The monster's body is also covered with iron structures that protect it from external dangers. The monster was identified as male and named the Zombie Monster. The child narrated the following story about the drawing: "While he was walking in the forest, he took a road he had never used before. He saw a cave and went inside. There, he made a friend. This monster cuts with his hands and strikes people against the wall because he is strong and beats everyone." An examination of Figure 2 revealed a human-like figure that nevertheless possessed unusual characteristics, including a body protected by iron and balls in its hands capable of breaking bones.

Figure 3 was drawn by a girl. The monster's most distinctive characteristics were that it resembled a mouse, ate insects, was afraid of people, did not like anyone, and remained alone. The monster was named Popi and identified as female. The child narrated the following story about the monster: "Once upon a time, there was a Popi. Popi did not like anyone. Then, one day, her daughter disappeared. She looked for her but could not find her. One day, she went to the forest and saw a bear there, and then they became friends." In this drawing, the child portrayed the monster as resembling a mouse and provided detailed descriptions of its social and emotional characteristics.

Figure 4, drawn by a girl, depicts a one-eyed monster with blue eyes, a yellow face, and purple skin. The monster was identified as female and named Leyla. The child described the monster as follows: "The monster has one eye and a needle-like mouth. She is very frightening, very scary, and very angry. She is very bad and can bite people." An examination of Figure 4 indicated that the child depicted a figure resembling neither a human nor an animal. Although the child's account initially resembled an ordinary narrative, she subsequently used adjectives conventionally associated with monsters.

When the children's drawings and their related narratives were considered together, the monster figure did not emerge as a uniform or exclusively frightening being. Instead, the children produced multifaceted representations combining human, animal, and entirely imaginary characteristics. Some children portrayed monsters as humanoid characters that sang, were small and cute, experienced fear, and formed friendships, whereas others described them as powerful and aggressive beings that harmed people and possessed physically unusual features. Furthermore, as illustrated by Popi, a mouse-like monster who remained alone, disliked everyone, and later formed a friendship, the children used monster figures to express social and emotional experiences such as loneliness, fear, affection, friendship, and belonging. The character Leyla, with her single eye, needle-like mouth, and unusually colored appearance, demonstrates that children were also able to construct monsters using fantastic bodily characteristics with no direct equivalent in real life. Overall, the narratives indicate that the children did not restrict the monster image to fear and aggression. Rather, they personalized these figures through their imagination by attributing human behaviors, emotions, relationships, and life stories to them.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, and RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, children's understandings of the concept of the monster were examined through the gender, reality status, and characteristics they attributed to monsters, as well as through their drawings, naming practices, and narratives. The findings indicate that the children constructed the monster not as a one-dimensional and exclusively frightening being but as a flexible fictional figure combining human, animal, and unusual characteristics and capable of conveying meanings ranging from aggression to friendship. Although the vast majority of the children stated that monsters were not real, they attributed detailed physical, emotional, and behavioral characteristics to monsters in their drawings and narratives. This finding demonstrates that judgments about reality and narrative or emotional engagement with an imaginary figure are not mutually exclusive. From this perspective, the findings suggest that children can address themes such as fear, power, aggression, loneliness, and friendship through the monster figure without accepting it as a being that exists in the real world.

In the present study, most of the children—all of the boys and half of the girls—identified the monster as male. Given that monster imagery is generally associated with factors such as power, violence, and aggression, this finding suggests that the children's perceptions may have been influenced by gender roles and cultural representations (Çelik, 2016; Kalaycı, 2015). From the perspective of children's literature, monsters are generally not explicitly assigned a gender in stories. Nevertheless, in a discourse analysis of Tomris Uyar's "Şahmeran" in terms of gender roles, Şahin-Yeşil (2015) stated that the function of the monster in the story was to transform the male character into what he was expected to become—the desired hero. The distribution between boys and girls may also be considered in terms of the possibility of identification. The fact that all of the boys drew male monsters may be related to a tendency to assign their own gender to the characters they created. By contrast, the fact that half of the girls identified their monsters as male suggests that not only identification but also culturally established prototypes of monsters may have been influential, as discussed above. In other words, while the boys may have gendered the monster as a character resembling themselves, some of the girls may have understood monstrosity through characteristics such as aggression and physical strength, which are culturally associated with masculinity.

The names that the children assigned to their monsters demonstrate the coexistence of individual creativity and a shared cultural repertoire. Some of the names assigned to the monsters appear to have been derived from media content. This finding may indicate that the media influence the formation of children's images of imaginary beings. In particular, films and cartoons featuring monsters may be likely to contain violent content. Children's exposure to such violence may negatively affect their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Çamurdan, 2007). One underlying reason may be that children interpret visual media content differently from adults. One study found that children between the ages of 3 and 11 interpreted the internationally and nationally award-winning animated production "The Little Boy and the Beast" quite differently from adults and did not understand the intended message in scenarios such as the mother and father turning into monsters (Unterstell et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the use of ordinary human names such as "Leyla," "Melek," and "Asmin Ceren Selin" reveals that the boundary between monsters and humans was permeable in the children's representations.

One of the most prominent findings of the study was that 95% of the children stated that monsters did not exist in reality. This result demonstrates that young children were largely able to make accurate judgments about the ontological status of imaginary beings such as monsters. The distinction between reality and fantasy during early childhood is not regarded as a binary competence that is acquired suddenly and applied uniformly across all situations; rather, it develops progressively depending on age, context, and the nature of the entity in question. The present finding is consistent with the literature. Although previous studies have indicated that children's individual characteristics and past experiences may influence the development of such perceptions (Sharon & Woolley, 2004; Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2008), research taking children's age and developmental characteristics into account has shown that, after approximately four years of age, children begin to develop the understanding that figures such as monsters are not real (Harris et al., 1991).

An examination of the children's views concerning the characteristics of monsters showed that negative characteristics, such as hitting others and eating people, were reported more frequently. This perception indicates that monster imagery was strongly associated with the concepts of threat and physical harm in the children's minds. This finding is consistent with the prevailing cultural understanding of monsters (Kaval, 2025; Taflı Düzgün, 2009; Yurtseven, 2025). However, the emergence of characteristics such as singing, experiencing fear, being small and cute, and forming friendships indicates that the children did not merely reproduce the culturally shared prototype of the frightening monster but transformed this figure within their own narratives. This variation may have been influenced by ecological factors in the children's environments, including gender, temperament, and family. The findings also showed that the children generally constructed narratives about their monsters. An examination of these narratives revealed that, in addition to associating monsters with

violence, the children frequently referred to experiences such as affection and friendship. Overall, the children's narratives demonstrate that the monster figure mediated the expression not only of fear and aggression but also of social-emotional themes such as loneliness, protection, friendship, and acceptance (Milandri, 2004). From this perspective, monster drawings may be regarded not merely as products reflecting children's fears but as narrative tools that reveal how children understand the relationships between fiction and reality, power and vulnerability, and threat and friendship.

When the context and findings of the study are considered as a whole, the potential significance of children's monster drawings becomes apparent. Children's drawings are regarded as an important source of data that complements verbal expression and helps researchers understand how children perceive themselves and their surroundings (Taşdemir, 2025). Drawing-based practices such as the Draw-a-Person, House-Tree-Person, and Draw-a-Cactus tasks have been used in various research and assessment processes to obtain information about children's self-perceptions, emotional experiences, relationships, and the meanings they attribute to their environment (Görgülü, Erden, & Topçu, 2021; Güven, 2015; Mukba, Kaya, & Özkan, 2018). Contemporary approaches, however, emphasize that drawings should not be interpreted in isolation as diagnostic products that definitively reveal a child's personality or psychological state; rather, they should be considered together with the child's own explanations, developmental characteristics, and cultural context (Driessnack, 2006; Fabris et al., 2023). In the present study, the children represented monsters as human, animal, or unusual beings and attributed genders, names, emotions, behaviors, and life stories to them. These findings indicate that the instruction to "draw a monster" may create a space for expression through which children's understandings of concepts such as fear, power, threat, loneliness, protection, and friendship can become visible. In particular, examining the drawings together with the stories narrated by the children makes it possible to understand the elements in the drawings within the children's own worlds of meaning, rather than interpreting them directly as psychological indicators imposed by the researcher. In this respect, a monster-drawing activity may be considered, in a manner similar to Draw-a-Person or Draw-a-Cactus tasks, as an assessment activity that facilitates understanding the child, deepens the interview process, and enables children to communicate emotions and thoughts that they may have difficulty expressing directly through a fictional figure. The period between 60 and 72 months of age, as well as the subsequent primary school years, may be particularly suitable for the use of this method. Nevertheless, debates concerning the psychometric validity of drawing-based tests also indicate that cognitive or clinical conclusions should not be drawn solely from such products (Fabris et al., 2023; Troncone et al., 2021).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted with 20 children aged 66–84 months. Because the study group was small and limited to a single provincial center, the findings cannot be generalized to children from different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, or cultural contexts. The children's perceptions of monsters were examined through a single drawing activity, semi-structured questions, and stories narrated in relation to their drawings. Therefore, the data may have been influenced by the children's emotional states at the time of the activity, recently encountered fairy tales, films, cartoons, or digital content, as well as their interest in and ability to produce drawings. Since the children's media-use habits, family experiences, fear-related experiences, and previous encounters with monster figures were not examined directly, causal conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the sources of the characteristics that emerged in their drawings and narratives. Moreover, although the children's own explanations were taken as the primary basis for interpreting the drawings, the analysis of visual data inevitably involved a degree of researcher interpretation. Therefore, the "draw a monster" activity should not be regarded as a standardized or diagnostic test for identifying children's psychological characteristics. Rather, it should be considered a research-oriented draw-and-tell activity designed to reveal how children make sense of the concept of monsters.

Recommendations

Future studies should include larger study groups and compare the monster perceptions of children from different age groups, cultural backgrounds, residential settings, and socioeconomic contexts. Studies using balanced and diversified samples may also examine in greater detail how monster drawings vary according to age, gender, and previous preschool education experience. To understand the sources from which children acquire representations of monsters, researchers may draw on additional data sources, including parent and teacher interviews, the media content children consume, the books read to them, and their play experiences. Repeating drawing and narrative activities at different points in time may help determine whether children's monster perceptions reflect temporary influences or more enduring patterns of meaning-making.

Data diversity may also be increased by combining child-friendly methods such as drawing, individual interviews, play, story-completion activities, and puppetry. For the "draw a monster" instruction to be used as a tool that contributes to understanding children, validity and reliability studies should be conducted with different samples, assessment criteria should be defined clearly, and drawings should always be interpreted in conjunction with the children's own narratives. In educational settings, monster drawings and stories may be used as activities that encourage children to discuss their ideas about fear, power, loneliness, protection, and friendship. However, clinical or personality-related conclusions should not be drawn from the drawings alone.

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Ethics and Conflict of Interest

The authors of the study acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research. The authors declare that they acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research. The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest with other persons, institutions or organizations.

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to this study. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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