THE NECESSITY FOR PARENTS TO WATCH ANIMATED CARTOONS WITH CHILDREN AGED SEVEN TO ELEVEN YEARS

Dr. Mary Claire Akinyi Kidenda

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[1*]Dr. Mary Claire Akinyi Kidenda

[1]Post Graduate Student: The Technical University of Kenya

[*]kidendam@gmail.com

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to establish the necessity for parents to watch televised animated cartoons with children aged seven to eleven years.

Methodology: The study used a descriptive survey method to collect information through casual interviews and self-administered questionnaires.

Results: The study found out that the amount of time children spend watching animated cartoons on television can make them retract from social interactions with visitors, parents or other siblings when the television is on. Animated cartoons have an impact on children in respect to acquired or "borrowed" language and dressing styles and attitudes towards role types. These relations may be imperceptible to the casual observer but data show that the best (Kim Possible, Ben 10 and American Dragon) cartoon characters are idols, image ideals and role models to children in Nairobi, yet both the two cartoon characters are not representative of children they interact with every day. This study found that it is prudent animated cartoons affect the perceptions and attitudes that are being reinforced in children and the implication of this on how they construct their worldview and self-worth.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: Parents should be concerned and watch animated cartoons with children because animated cartoons have become an institution through which society is using to bring up children and use to teach values. Media practitioners should air animated cartoons that have no violence or bad morals but are still popular with children. The government should set policies governing the content in animated cartoons aired by the media houses

Keywords: *Necessity, Parents, Animated cartoons, Children aged seven to eleven years.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The last part of the twentieth century was characterized by a process of commercialization, deregulation and privatization through a thoroughgoing restructuring of markets and marketplaces as a result of the 'globalization' process (Kotz, 2015). Globalisation has come to mean and imply a small shrunken world in which people gain access to cultures and knowledge that were once beyond their reach, a transcending of cultural boundaries that enables multitudes from all social

strata to participate in the global arena. This has stoked fears that globalisation contains within it a homogenising effect where local cultures may soon find themselves subsumed by the more dominant cultural patterns (Raaij, Veldhoven & Wärneryd, 2013). All of these fears have impacted on Nairobi in one way or another causing apprehension in some quarters. What raises this fear within mass media is the fact that the institutions and enterprises that control the process of globalisation of mass media have an inherent standardising effect that sets "global standards and tastes" at the expense of local, cultures and regional aesthetics. Nairobi and its environs have not escaped this process. The fear and apprehension are real when one realizes that globalization expanded consumption of television programs including animated cartoons, films, news, games and advertising. This particular development in mass media portends influence on cultures of people worldwide, especially children who inform their perception of culture and trends through the electronic media (Cruz-Roa *et at.,* 2013)

It is the hope of this research that a path can be charted that will make available to children progressive media that can reinforce positive attributes and gender constructions that view male and female in equal light in society. Children can come through to see female roles like Kim Possible in active and positive framing. It is also the hope of this research that effort is going to be put into producing local animated cartoons that include local realities and aspirations (Ekwe, 2018).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Social Learning Theory

According to the social learning theory, knowledge is best constructed when learners collaborate together. Students support one another and encourage new ways to form, construct and reflect on new material. The social learning theory of Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Bandura states "Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do (Zimmerman, 2013). A key aspect of social learning theory is that of modelling whereby we observe others and then model our behaviour after them. The effects of modelling can be particularly apparent when children are exposed to televised animated cartoons without proper guidance. This may make the child develop totally new behaviour from speech, dressing style to table etiquette and moral stances (Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2015).

Social learning theory is much more than just observing behaviour and modelling our own after it. One must be motivated to attend to modelled behaviour, store information about it in memory (e.g. Rehearsing it) and to later retrieve it when an opportunity arises to put it to use (Gross, 2015). This helps to understand why children are susceptible to modelling changes as they mature and grow older by being more discriminate observers of their environment, and are better placed to extract general rules of behaviour from specific examples that they have observed. Berger (1995) says that the study of human development has greatly benefited from this theory in the sense that it has led researchers to see that many behaviours that may seem to be inborn or a result of deeply rooted emotional problems may actually be as a result of the immediate environment. Social learning

theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences (Gross, 2015).

2.1.2 Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura (19861994) has argued that behaviour, personal (cognitive and biological) factors and environmental events operate as interacting determinants that influence each other in both ways. While the factors vary in their strength as influences they do not always operate simultaneously. Most external influences affect behaviour through cognitive processes as the meaning is assigned to symbols and texts. Individuals have a self-regulating capability that anticipates self-satisfaction from fulfilling valued standards and responds in an evaluative manner to their own behaviour. As part of their self-reflective capability, individuals verify thought self-reflexively through four modes of thought; the persuasive, logical, vicarious, and inactive processes assess the adequacy between thought and the results of their actions. Vicarious (an action felt or enjoyed through imagined participation in the experience of others) learning begins in infancy (Mazur, 2016). Vicarious thrills experienced through comparisons with experiences on television can foster shared misconceptions of people, places or things (Boyd, 2013).

Children between the ages of 8 to 13 years who watched television cartoons in a study by Peruta, and Powers (2017) quoting Mayes and Valentine (1979) recognized that the characters exhibited behaviour that stereotyped gender roles. The children evaluated the male and female characters on characteristics that included "brave and do not need to be rescued" and "dominant and intelligent and can make decisions easily". Other characteristics included unconcerned about appearance, independent, keeps out of trouble, not easily excited in a crisis, acts as a leader, harsh, aggressive, does not have a strong need for security and does not cry easily. The researchers found significant differences in all dependent variables, and respondents' gender produced no significant interaction effect. Consequently, children may pick up these gender-biased behaviours and develop the gender-bias attitudes that may be are exhibited on television (Yaşar, 2018).

Among the various factors that help shape gender-typed behaviours, role models and imitation are significant influences (Hines *et. al.,* 2016). Research suggests that children who view violent programming on television will behave more aggressively with peers (Can & Kaya, 2016) and the children who view pro-social behaviours on television are more likely to exhibit those types of behaviours themselves. The development of autonomy, initiative, and a sense of industriousness are critical to young children's positive development. Children who witness female characters on television programs who are passive, indecisive, and subordinate to men, and who see this reinforced by their environment, will likely believe that this is the norm. Female children are less likely to develop the qualities of autonomy, initiative and industry if they rarely see those traits portrayed. Likewise, where male characters are portrayed enacting leadership roles that exhibit assertive and decisive behaviour, children assume this to be the appropriate way for males to behave. Television captivates and affords children social learning opportunities and hence after a few years' exposures to the animated cartoons shown on Kenyan TV, children acquire role models, dressing styles, language, behaviour and a lifestyle (Perry, Ruggiano, Shtompel & Hassevoort, 2015).

2.2 Empirical Framework

The power to shape perceptions and attitudes through the medium of animated cartoons should impose a great ethical obligation on cartoonists, for when used in offensive, sexist or demeaning ways, cartoons, just like other forms of communication, can distract, incite and even perpetuate undesirable and negative behaviour in children and society at large. Most media and especially animated cartoons to which children are exposed and the conditions under which exposure occurs cannot teach. Television is a persuasive influence on children from a tender age and must then to some degree influence their cognitive and social development (Can & Kaya, 2016). In a study cited by Hetherington and Parke, weekend cartoons that are typically designed for children had an over 70% rate of violence contained in them. Choma (2013) observes in his article Visual Subliminal Messaging in Children's Cartoons that children's cartoons are packed with many controversial topics such as violence and sexuality.

Animated cartoons feature anti-social themes such as violence, sex, cheating, bribing and even killing (Creeber, 2015). A report in 1992 by the US National Institute of Medical Health identified three major effects of children observing violence in animated cartoons. Children become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, become fearful of the world around them and behave in aggressive or harmful ways to others. For example in the popular animated cartoon series *Dexter's Laboratory*, Dexter is a genius who accesses his enormous laboratory devoted to science and inventions from his bedroom. Dexter's mum and dad have yet to discover the enormous science facility in their house, but his big sister Dee Dee has found her way in. She is always out to destroy Dexter and keeps sneaking into the lab to try and blow up his experiments. She scares him a lot and enjoys pressing buttons in the laboratory that always end up causing danger. While the popular *Ed Edd and Eddy* animated series shows pain administered with a smile. Children get to learn that you can inflict pain on someone and still afford a smile (Illustration 1)

1a   1b   1c

Illustration: 1*) Dexter's Laboratory* **1b)** *Ed, Edd and Eddy*

According to (Baym, 2015), when children are engaged in watching animated cartoons they seem to be anti-social. As long as the TV is on, children ignore visitors, parents and other siblings. They withdraw from social interaction. Their language and social skills are not practiced. She goes on to say that due to the passive nature of watching animated cartoons, children lack a desire to play outside with other children, thus killing the socialization and interaction (Condry, 2017). Chrisse Cannon (2007) a teacher in America in his article ''Are cartoons affecting America?'' opines that the programmes children watch affect their behaviour. He further says that cartoons affect children by impending proper mental and moral development because they do not challenge the Childs

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mind. The screen does all of the thinking for the child and leaving nothing to the child's imagination and only minimal brain activity occurs. He also observes that cartoons display improper behaviour, morals and actions. He says that the characters in cartoons may yell at each other, telling the other person "shut up!" At other times, he says, the cartoons may show hatred and violence, with fighting occurring between the characters. He further observes that the characters in cartoons are frequently disrespectful towards parents and other authority figures as well. He points out that clearly these programmes are not promoting or reinforcing the values that most parents teach their children.

Violence in animated cartoons affects the way children watch violent cartoons (Monkolprasit & Arunrangsiwed, 2016). For example, Renner found out that those children whose facial expressions, while viewing televised violent cartoons, depicted the positive emotions of happiness, pleasure, interest or involvement were more likely to hurt another child than were those children whose facial expressions indicated disinterest or displeasure. The Kenyan environment has also become very dangerous for children. They are known to suffer stress, a scourge ordinarily experienced by adults. Over the past two decades, hundreds of studies have examined how violent cartoons on TV affect children and young people. There is a growing consensus that children are vulnerable to violent messages (Condry, 2017).

It is true that animated cartoons also have a positive social impact on children. It serves as an important educational and socialization tool. They have helped children expand understanding of the world they live in; it has provided them opportunities to learn the values of the nation they live in and the culture, civilization of other children and countries. Parents have used animated cartoons to babysit. They have also been used to provide entertainment and relaxation for children. The educational puppet cartoon series, Sesame Street (illustration 2), launched its campaign-*Healthy Habits for Life*, to encourage young children to adopt a more dynamic and nutritious lifestyle featuring the benefits of fruits and veggies in their daily diet. An animated cartoon series created to encourage British children to eat more fruit and vegetables has become the focus of a new Department of Health campaign. Trials have shown that the cartoon prompted a dramatic increase in children's consumption of fruit and vegetables.

Illustration: 2a and 2b: *Sesame Street*

As well as encouraging a sedentary lifestyle, animated cartoons can also contribute to childhood obesity by aggressively marketing junk food to young audiences. According to the Canadian Paediatric Society, most food advertising on children's TV shows is for fast foods, candy and pre-sweetened cereals. Commercials for healthy food make up only 4 per cent. Today in many children's cartoon's one sees cartoon characters jumping, diving, and falling from very high heights, then landing without being harmed. These sorts of cartoons display a false sense of reality upon children and children believe that they can fall off a tall cliff or be shot with a gun in the face and walk from these incidents with barely a scratch (Creeber, 2015).

The presence or absence of role models, how women and men, girls and boys are presented, and what activities they participate in on the screen powerfully affect how girls and boys view their role in the world. Studies of cartoons, regular television, and commercials show that although many changes have occurred and girls have a wider range of role models, still for girls "how they look" is more important than "what they do" (Arendt, 2015). In a 1997 study designed to study how children described the roles of cartoon characters, children (aged four to nine) "perceived most cartoon characters in stereotypical ways: boys were violent and active and girls were domesticated, interested in boys and concerned with appearance" (Napier, 2016).

The study, therefore, sought to determine the discussion of cartoons by children aged seven and eleven years with parents and teachers in Nairobi County, Kenya.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive survey method to collect information through casual interviews and self-administered questionnaires. The research used the non-probability design and employed judgmental sampling to select a sample of 426 children (224 boys and 202 girls) aged 7 to11 years old from the six selected primary schools in Nairobi. The study used structured questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions to collect primary data. A pilot study was used to test the validity and reliability of the research instrument using Cronbach's alpha on a selected sample of twenty-five students in the age bracket of 7-11 years from Nairobi Primary School. The collected data was edited, cleaned, coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of SPSS version 11.0. The data was analyzed through straight tabulations and generated tables, graphs, and charts such as measures of central tendency such as means and modes and measures of dispersion such as the standard deviations.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Discussion of Cartoons with Parents and Teachers

Figure 1 Shows that 96.2% per cent of the respondents watched cartoons at home. Only 3.8% said they did not.
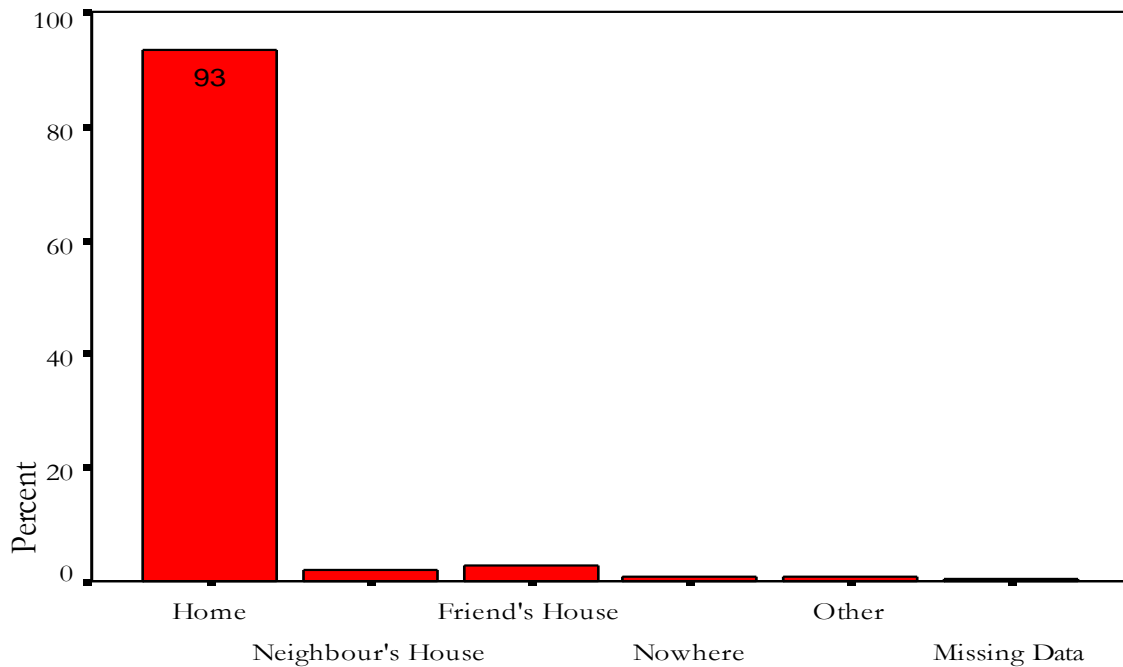
Figure 1: Where Respondents Watch Cartoons

It can be deduced that the respondents like watching animated cartoons at home because they spend many hours at home especially during weekends and during school vacation. Again, most consumption or viewership takes place during the weekends or holidays, when some parents are likely to be at home with their children. It is therefore expected that most parents would talk to their children about the programmes that they watch of which cartoons are a major constituent.

Almost all, 96.9% of the respondents lived with their parents who were expected to guide them on what to watch and what not to watch. The other 2.8% also lived with a guardian. The results in Figure 2 indicate that adults neither watch nor discuss cartoons with children.

Parental Involvement with Cartoons Children Watch
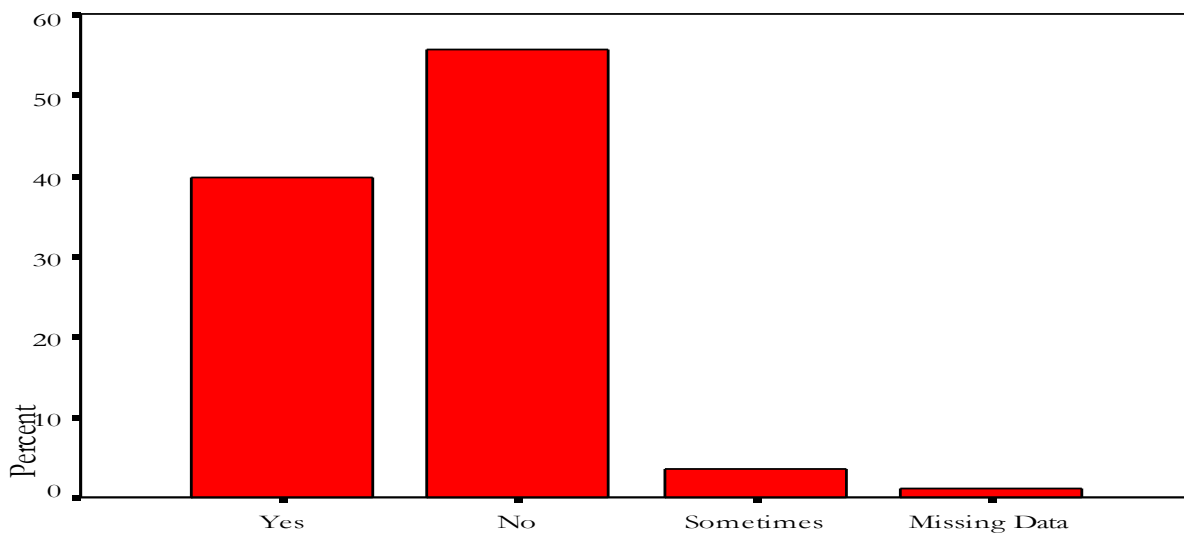
Figure 2: *Parental involvement with cartoons children watch*

This study reveals otherwise with only 39.7% of the 426 respondents saying that they talk about cartoons with their parents. Fifty-five point six per cent do not talk about cartoons with their parents as revealed earlier in this report. On whether they discuss cartoons with their teachers almost all of the respondents, 92% said they did not while 6.6% said they did talk about cartoons with their teachers. Despite the fact that the question was asking for a "Yes or "No" kind of answer, some of the children went ahead and gave elaborate responses as to why they do not discuss cartoons with their parents. They substantiated their "No" with comments such as *"cartoons are for kids," "my parents are too busy to watch cartoons with me," of course not"* and *"Never"*.

For those children who talk about cartoons with their teacher, it is indeed a good sign since teachers can guide them on some of the things that they see in cartoons. It should, however, be noted that this guidance is from the fact that the teachers are older and wiser and not because they are more media literate.

5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

Almost all the children who responded to this question (95.3%) said they liked watching animated cartoons. The study found out that the amount of time children spend watching animated cartoons on television can make them retract from social interactions with visitors, parents or other siblings when the television is on. This can also make them lack the desire to play, socialize or interact with other children. The children admitted that they watch animated cartoons while eating and some even watch while doing their homework. Respondents also watch cartoons during times when they could be talking to their parents for example during meal times. Some children say that parents watch TV with them while they are eating. The study found that gender dictates the kind of cartoons that are preferred by either boys or girls.

5.2 Conclusions

Based on the study, the study concluded that animated cartoons have a profound influence on conditions and culture since for many children culture is something they partake through electronic media. The production and distribution of media products are concentrated in a few hands. There is, therefore, no great diversity in content and great blurring of boundaries between information and entertainment.

Parents are busier today than ever and kids are often home alone and spend so much time watching television, parents should not use television as a babysitter. They should limit screen time, including animated cartoons, movies, video games and computer time to less than two hours a day. Parents should provide alternative means of relaxation and entertainment rather than the passive leisure of watching animated cartoons, for example, go for a walk or a bike ride, stamp collecting, painting, star gazing, learning to play a musical instrument or read together. Listen to music, talk, play a game and enjoy each other's company. Parents should try to engage children in more interactive and family activities. They should watch the animated cartoons their children watch or preview them, use it as an opportunity to discuss inappropriate material or unacceptable behaviour or lifestyle. This will be an important determinant of the amount and types of animated cartoons children watch. This can also help prepare children to make decisions on their own, whether about what they watch or how to make smart choices about sex, dressing, and language drinking, smoking and using drugs. Parents should pass along family values, not values children absorb from animated cartoons.

Media houses in places like Kenya have little choice in the content the audiences consume, especially the popular animated cartoons. That is because the five major networks produce and dictate what the rest of the world consumes. These corporations are profit-driven and the content of the cartoons they produce is geared largely towards their Western audience in worldview, imagery and language.

5.3 Recommendations

Parents should develop guidelines for children on how many animated cartoons he/she can watch; the less the better. Keep television out of a child's bedroom. The best place is the family room. Watch animated cartoons together and talk about what your child sees on the animated cartoons. They should help children understand and evaluate the content they watch in animated cartoons. Parents should not assume that all animated cartoons are harmless. The subtext of messages in animated cartoons dealing with sexuality and romance are ignored and unacknowledged by critics and parents. They should be considered because animated cartoons have become an institution through which society brings up children and use to teach values.

Parents should influence their child's viewing by modifying their own viewing habits. They should be good role models. Instead of coming home and flopping in front of the television and making its prime source of recreation, look for other options like going for a walk or ride a bicycle, painting, learn to play musical instruments, talk, play a game and enjoy each other's company. It is important that parents advocate for high-quality programmes for children and removal inappropriate animated cartoons from the local TV stations. Parents should take interest in combating hypersexualization in the animated cartoon and allow the children to stay young.

Media housed should air on Kenyan stations animated cartoons that have local animated imagery designed to relate to the child's world or context. Media practitioners should provide entertainment programming in which life's problems are not simply and quickly solved with either violent actions or hostile humour. They should air animated cartoons that have no violence or bad morals but are still popular with children. The government should set policies governing the content in animated cartoons aired by the media houses.

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