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Impact of Animation Movies on Children's Behavioral and Language Development

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Abstract:

The importance of the growing influence of media, especially television, on children's learning and behavior cannot be overemphasized. Being one of Africa's top countries with a free and thriving media space, Ghana has witnessed the proliferation of several television channels that continue to transmit a vast amount of cartoon content to children. While television viewing has been demonstrated to strongly influence the behavior of viewers of any age, children are fast becoming interested in cartoons which tend to influence their conduct and intellectual development in many ways. This study aimed to find out the influence that watching cartoons have on children's behavior and their language acquisition. A mixed method design was adopted using structured questionnaires, interviews, and observations to collect data from 100 sampled participants from Bolgatanga in Ghana. The study found that children spend an average of more than an hour daily watching cartoons and often without guidance or monitoring from parents or any adult persons. Overall, the study established that while cartoons may be a good medium to facilitate children's language development, they may also adversely influence their behavior.

Keywords: Animated movies, influence of cartoons, children's behavior, child development, language acquisition, Ghana

1. Introduction

Child-centered television shows and animation movies (often loosely called cartoons) have, over several years, been entertaining children all over the world. Perhaps because of the convenient escape it provides parents, children are actually supported and encouraged to consume more and more animated content compared to those of yesteryears who largely engaged in daily outdoor activities (Bedekar & Joshi, 2020).

While it has been argued severally that children are fond of animated movies (or cartoons) for varying reasons (Parvin & Islam, 2020), such programs under certain circumstances may be disadvantageous to them (Rai, Waskel, Sakalle, Dixit & Mahore, 2017; Raza, Awan & Gondal, 2016). In the process, most children become so engaged with these animation movies that they are often less involved in physical activities (Atabey, 2021). Consequently, continuous consumption of these animated contents tends to shape children's tastes, preferences, behaviors, and attitudes (Parvin & Islam, 2020; Hassan & Daniyal, 2013). Animated movies have also been identified to be a great source of fun, activity, and learning for children (Ghilzai, Alam, Ahmad, Shaukat & Noor, 2017).

Today, animated movies are fast becoming an integral part of most children's daily habits. A number of studies have revealed that children who regularly consume animated content tend to have an improved language acquisition rate. Further, such children have been found to often exhibit aggressive behaviors (Rai et al., 2017).

1.1. Impact of Cartoons on Children's Behavior

Animated movies or cartoons have been shown to aid children's learning and help them to entertain themselves. Inversely, they can also lead to children learning and engaging in addictive, aggressive, restless, and violent behaviors (Bedekar & Joshi, 2020).

According to Williamson et al. (2013), children imitate social behaviors for a long time and often exhibit them during social interactions when the situation is appropriate. Invariably, how the various genders are presented and the activities they participate in on-screen have a powerful effect on how children perceive themselves in real-life situations.

Kidenda (2018) writes that animated movies have a negative tendency to distract, incite and expose children to negative and undesirable behaviors. Often, these cartoons, which are packed with controversial and distressing content such as sexuality and violence, have been found to act as a persuasive influence on children's cognitive and social development, especially at such tender ages (Zhang et al., 2019). The American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) (2013) added that children who consume cartoon contents in which violence is realistic, frequent, and unpunished are likely to practice what they see.

Further, Azeem (2021) asserts that when children engage in long hours of cartoon movies, they tend to cultivate altruistic and anti-social behaviors. Accordingly, as long as these animation movies are on, children are likely to ignore people around them and withdraw from social interactions (Lulciuc & Minulescu, 2020; Njiri, 2019). Other similar studies found that, because of the passive nature of watching animated movies, it drains the desire in children to play outside with others, denies them relevant socialization, and inhibits their language skills (Akyar & Sapsaglam, 2019; Chahrazed, 2019).

Cartoons have also been noted to impede proper cognitive and moral development among children because they often fail to challenge the child's mind (Dewi, 2021; Walker & Weidenbenner, 2019). While the pre-programmed movie does virtually all the thinking on the consuming child's behalf, it fails to stimulate his creativity and imagination, resulting in very minimal brain activity (Chowdhury, Yesmin & Obaydullah, 2019).

Despite the above effects of the consumption of cartoons on children's development, it has been found that these animations yield some positive outcomes (Salghonaim, 2020). For instance, cartoons are very useful educational and socialization tools that have been demonstrated to:

- Help children have a better appreciation of the world they live in,
- Serve as a source of entertainment and relaxation,
- Potentially become a good medium for cultural civilization and functions as a powerful instrument of information and communication among children (Sharma & Suri, 2020; Sahin, 2019; Olasinde, 2018)

1.2. Impact of Cartoons on Children's Language Acquisition

Perhaps the most prominent and observable impact of cartoons on children is the way it helps them in acquiring new vocabulary and, in the process, facilitating their ability to acquire a new language (Sharma & Suri, 2020). According to Rezeki (2021), language acquisition involves the processes by which a person attains the capacity to perceive, produce and use words to understand and communicate. LaPrairie (2018) distinguished between two phases of language acquisition:

- The receptive phase, and
- The expressive, productive, or eloquence phase

Being the first stage of language development, the receptive phase refers to the point where children receive, understand, and process language internally. This process entails differentiating between speech sounds, understanding the meaning of words and syntax, and making inferences which are all essential characteristics abundantly available in child-focused animation movies (Nadig, 2013).

Many researchers have investigated the relationship between watching cartoons and children's language acquisition (Rezeki, 2021; Turkmen, 2021). On the other hand, a number of studies (Raza, Awan & Gondal, 2016; Stamou, Maroniti & Griva, 2015) have established that cartoons have an impact on children's language and behavior.

Without a doubt, the rise in the consumption of cartoon content has impacted children's language acquisition and diction by improving their listening and speaking abilities and boosting their confidence (Lodhi, Ibrar, Shamim & Naz, 2018). This is because children at the linguistic stage take their utterances from what they see and hear from the mass media and their environments (Rezeki, 2021). Sajana (2018) argued that cartoons are a better medium for child-targeted communication. The language used is mostly simple and humor-filled ways to explain various complex concepts. Similarly, Rai et al. (2017) and Chaudhry (2017) are of the view that cartoons are very effective in facilitating children's basic linguistic abilities.

2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed approach and an exploratory design to evaluate the impact of animation movies on children's behavioral and language development. A total sample of one hundred participants comprising sixty children and forty parents were selected using interviews and structured questionnaires with a combination of the purposive and random sampling techniques.

The child participants at elementary levels of education were selected based on their ages (between 7 to 12 years) and regular access to cartoon viewing (at least five hours) per week. The tools employed to gather data included a questionnaire (comprising both open and close-ended items) and interviews. While parents responded to interviews, the children answered very simple structured questionnaires with the help of their parents or guardians. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure the frequency, percentage, and mean values of quantitative data and with content analysis to analyze the qualitative data.

3. Data Analysis and Findings

3.1. Demographic Profile of Parents

The demographic data of the hundred respondents drawn from parents and child groups was analyzed and presented in this section. Some of the key demographic characteristics discussed include gender, the highest level of

education completed, and employment status on the part of parent respondents. The children's demographic characteristics also comprised gender, age, and educational stage.

Variable	Categories	Freq.	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	9	22.5
	Female	31	77.5
	TOTAL	40	100
Highest Level of Education	Certificate	2	5.0
	Diploma	15	37.5
	Bachelor's Degree	18	45.0
	Master's Degree	5	12.5
	Doctorate Degree	0	0
	TOTAL	40	100
Employment Status	Employed elsewhere	26	65.0
	Runs own business	6	15.0
	Unemployed	8	20.0
	Retired	0	0
	TOTAL	40	100

Table 1: Parents' Demographic Characteristics
Source: Field Data, 2022

The data illustrates that more than 75% of parent participants in this research were females while 22.5% were male, pointing to the fact that due consideration was given to both genders to solicit their views on the subject matter. Regarding the parents' levels of education, it was observed that at least 90% of the participants have at least some level of higher education, which is positive for the research considering the issues being investigated. Further, 80% of the respondents were employed either in their own business (15%) or by an external employer (65%).

3.2. Impact of Cartoons on Children's Behavior

In exploring the impact of cartoons on a child's behavior, this study recorded responses from parents to examine if they have observed a change in children's behavior as they watch these cartoons. Parents reported on the estimated times their children spend daily watching cartoons. With the response categories of low viewers (up to an hour), moderate viewers (more than an hour but less than three hours), and heavy viewers (over three hours) per day, the majority of parents reported that their children spend between two to three hours daily watching cartoons, representing moderate viewers. A few of the respondents explained that daily, children spend some of their time watching cartoons. From the extracts of transcribed interviews with parents, one of them explained:

'My children also have tablets on which the content is downloaded so they can watch anytime on the go. It offers me a lot of convenience and freedom to focus on my tasks.'

Another retorted:

'Whenever they return from school, I engage them to do their homework. Thereafter, they are free to watch the television until supper is ready. That would be approximately three and a half hours.'

Daily Average Time Spent Watching Cartoons	Frequency	Percent (%)
Up to an hour	7	17.5
More than 1 hr. but less than 3 hrs.	28	70
More than 3 hrs.	5	12.5
Total	40	100

Table 2: Average Daily Time Spent by Children Watching Cartoons
Source: Field Data, 2022

When asked if their children sometimes imitate cartoon characters they have watched in real life, over 75% of the parents responded in the affirmative. Hence, Children have a habit of copying or mimicking their favorite cartoon characters. This way, cartoons tend to have a strong impact on the behavior of children. One mother, for instance, stated:

'My three-year-old son climbs up tables and the sofa and then jumps off with the expression that he is Captain Planet, and the power is his.'

Similarly, another mother observed her daughter's favorite cartoon-imitation behavior when she reported: *'She always wants to behave exactly like her favorite Peppa Pig; she wants to be that big sister to her brother George, always playful, always asking many questions, and always wanting to jump in muddy puddles. I hope she keeps up with those intelligent questions.'*

A third parent added further:

'Most of the time after school, the TV is under their control. We only get to see our preferred programs when they are fed up. It looks like their favorite is Bubble Guppies, and they tend to act like those animated dogs and fishes.'

Beyond parents reporting their children's imitation of their favorite cartoon characters, most of them also noticed that their children idolize or glorify their favorite cartoon characters. A parent, for instance, retorted:

'Anytime my son declines to eat, take his medicine, or refuses to reason with me, I need to cajole him by calling him by the name of his favorite hero, Batman. Most times, when he goes through a painful experience that would ordinarily result in long minutes of continuous crying, we often tease him by saying Batman does not cry. It is only on that note that he would stop crying or throwing tantrums.'

Another noted a change in her children's behavioral preferences and their desire to be like their favorite cartoon heroes when she indicated:

'My sons want their school bags, water bottles, lunch boxes, and even their birthday cakes to be branded by images of their favorite cartoon hero Ben 10. Even while they play with their friends, they would usually want to be called by the names of that cartoon.'

Do Children Imitate Their Favorite Cartoon Characters?	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	31	77.5
No	7	17.5
Don't know	2	5
Total	40	100

Table 3: Children Imitating Cartoon Characters

Source: Field Data, 2022

Beyond the children imitating and trying to look or be associated with their favorite cartoon characters, the interview further probed if there was any change in the behavior of children after they had continuously watched these contents. A considerable number of parents remarked that their children are picking up a few moral values from these cartoon characters, resulting in behavioral changes. A parent, for instance, noted:

'My daughter quite suddenly expresses a few good morals like honesty, helpfulness, and teamwork from the many episodes of Peppa Pig... I am pretty impressed about this development, and I am sure this is coming from her long hours of watching that cartoon.'

A second parent explained:

'Certainly, my son is showing some mild aggression attitudes, which has not been the case. He used to be calm and reasonable until he started taking a keen interest in watching those cartoons. We have decided as parents to regulate how much cartoon content he sees and at what hours of the day.'

Does Watching Cartoon Impact Children's Behavior?	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	24	60
No	12	30
Don't know	4	10
Total	40	100

Table 4: Cartoon Influencing Children's Behavior

Source: Field Data, 2022

3.3. Impact of Animated Movies on Children's Language Acquisition

From the backdrop that half an hour per day's exposure to kids' content television viewing was related to language development among infants and toddlers (Enayati & Farhad, 2016; Poštič, 2015; Karakas & Sariçoban, 2012). This study aimed to find out if watching cartoons had any influence on children's language acquisition.

The content analysis of transcriptions from the parents' interviews shows that a majority of 36 (approximately 90%) of the participating parents believed that children's language acquisition skills are improved through watching cartoons.

One of the participating parents, for instance, reported:

'These cartoons serve as a new form of technology which combines learning with fun and brightly colored images in an interaction that facilitates my children's language proficiency... I have observed with delight that my children's acquisition of new vocabulary is noticeably good.'

Another wrote:

'I believe watching cartoons by kids substantially impacts their listening abilities, vocabulary development, and diction. The downsides notwithstanding, I guess it is good for parents to supervise what their kids watch because they would certainly learn something worthwhile beyond the entertainment.'

Impact of Cartoons on Children's Language Acquisition	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	36	90
No	3	7.5
Don't know	1	2.5
Total	40	100

Table 5: Impact of Watching Cartoons on Children's Language Acquisition

Source: Field Data, 2022

3.3.1. Children's Demographic Data

With respect to the children's demographic data, the male gender dominated with 60% of the respondents. Accordingly, the majority (80%) of the children surveyed were aged between 7 and 9 years. While a considerable number (38.3%) of the children sampled were in upper primary, the data shows that about 53.4% of the participants were either in pre-school or lower primary.

Variable	Categories	Freq.	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	36	60.0
	Female	24	40.0
	TOTAL	60	100
Approximated Age	7 years	23	38.3
	8 years	10	16.7
	9 years	15	25.0
	10 years	4	6.7
	11 years	5	8.3
	12 years	3	5.0
	TOTAL	60	100
	Stage of Education	Pre-School	13
Lower Primary		19	31.7
Upper Primary		23	38.3
Junior High		5	8.3
TOTAL		60	100

Table 6: Children's Demographic Characteristics
Source: Field Data, 2022

Owing to the responses provided by parents (and guardians), the study went ahead to examine the views of the children regarding certain issues. While all the participating children confirmed watching cartoons daily, only 13% of them reported watching cartoons for more than 3 hours per day. Consequently, over 85% of these children watch cartoons but up to three hours daily.

Further, although more than 90% of the children mentioned that watching cartoons helped them learn new things, 88% of them watched either for fun or just to pass the time. Even more, the majority of these children (80%) watch them without their parents. Accordingly, more than 50% of the children surveyed reported that either no one decides for them what to watch on television or they decided that by themselves.

Question	Response Categories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Do you watch cartoons?	Yes	60	100
	No	0	0
	TOTAL	60	100
How much time do you normally spend watching cartoons in a day?	Up to 1 hour	15	25
	2 to 3 hours	37	62
	More than 3 hours	8	13
	TOTAL	60	100
Why do you watch cartoons?	For fun	35	58
	I learn from it	7	12
	Just to pass time	18	30
	TOTAL	60	100
Do cartoons help you learn new things?	Yes	56	93
	No	4	7
	TOTAL	60	100
Do your parents watch cartoons with you?	Yes	12	20
	No	48	80
	TOTAL	60	100
Who decides the programs you should watch and the time to watch television at home?	Myself	34	57
	My parents	15	25
	Other elderly	11	18
	TOTAL	60	100

Table 7: Children's Questionnaire
Source: Field Data, 2022

4. Discussion of Findings

4.1. Impact of Cartoons on Children's Behavior

From the data findings of this study, it was demonstrated that watching cartoons is increasingly becoming one of many children's daily habits, which contributes to mold their thinking and behaviors (Atabey, 2021; Sharma & Suri, 2020; Akyar & Sapsaglam, 2019; Olasinde, 2018). Based on the analysis of the data, it was observed that out of all the sixty children surveyed:

- At least 17.5% of them were light viewers (i.e., they watch cartoons only up to an hour daily),
- At least 62% of them were moderate viewers (i.e., they watched between an hour and up to 3 hours of cartoons each day), and
- 13% of the children were heavy viewers (i.e., they watched cartoons for more than 3 hours per day)

While all the participating children watch cartoons regularly, a considerable number of both parents (12.5%) and children (13%) reported that at least more than three hours were spent daily by children watching cartoons. Relating this finding to earlier recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (2005) (which discourages children under two years from having any screen time at all and children from the age of five to eighteen years to have only up to two hours a day of screen time), this development must be a cause of concern.

What is more, it was determined through the data analysis that watching cartoons impacts children's behaviors both positively and adversely. While a good number of parents (77.5%) reported that their children imitated their favorite cartoon characters, 60% of them indicated that cartoons impacted children's behavior. These results are consistent with earlier findings (Salghonaim, 2020; Sahin, 2019; & Zhang et al., 2019) which similarly reported a change in children's behavior after they were exposed to continuous consumption of cartoon content.

It was further detected that children, most of the time, either watch these cartoons under no adult supervision or choose to watch certain cartoon contents themselves without any adult guidance. A finding which contravenes Kindenda's (2018) recommendation showed that children should often watch cartoons in the company of adults because their learning is improved under such conditions.

With many of these cartoons designed to reflect Western culture, these 'foreign' contents may not be socially and culturally relevant to these children, especially in the Ghanaian context. With various theories of childhood development (including the cognitive theory, theory of social learning, operant conditioning, and the theory of moral development) pointing out that the childhood stage is the most important stage of any person's mental development (Kukreja, 2019; Njiiri, 2019 & Rai et al., 2017), the idea of learning from one's immediate environment about how the world works is key in shaping children's attitudes and behaviors in an acceptable manner.

Additionally, the analysis revealed that about 93% of the children reported learning new things like the names of shapes, colors, alphabets, and numbers, as well as new rhymes and vocabulary from watching cartoons. However, the researcher also found that 88% of the children only watch cartoons for fun or as a favorite activity to pass the time.

4.2. Impact of Cartoons on Children's Language Acquisition

This study also explored whether watching cartoons had any impact on children's language acquisition. With Krashen's (2003) hypothesis that children acquire foreign language better by perceiving materials with the ear and the eyes (i.e., through listening to or watching relevant content), the study set out to investigate how watching cartoons could bring any benefits to language acquisition to the child. The findings from the data analysis again revealed that an overwhelming majority of parents (90%) believe that watching cartoons facilitate children's language acquisition which is one of the positive outcomes of cartoons on children. This reinforces Sajana's (2018) earlier view that cartoons are a better medium of child-targeted communication because of their use of simple and humor-filled language to explain various complex concepts. This finding is again in line with a couple of earlier studies (Chaudhry, 2017; Rai et al., 2017; Raza et al., 2016 & Stamou et al., 2015) which found that watching cartoons by kids positively impacts their language acquisition abilities.

5. Conclusions

The important role of cartoons in children's learning, entertainment, and behavioral formation cannot be overemphasized. Cartoon programs thus have both negative and positive consequences. Despite its significant role in supplementing children's entertainment, facilitating their learning and language development, and cultivating their cognitive skills, cartoons have been found to lead children to engage in anti-social behaviors.

Following this study's findings that watching cartoons have an impact on both the behavior and language development among children, it is recommended that children should watch such content under adult supervision and guidance. Adults may also pre-examine the content of cartoons by evaluating their suitability for the child's age before permitting such content for children. This way, the positive impacts of each episode or edition of a cartoon could be maximized while the negative influences could be better controlled.

In addition, it is important to emphasize that media firms, state regulators of the media space (like the Ghana Media Commission, the Ministry of Communication, etc.), and successive governments ensure a higher level of child-friendly programming quality and the censorship or removal of inappropriate cartoon content and the development of domestic children-centered animated cartoons.

5.1. Opportunity for Future Research

This study has unveiled some general research gaps with regard to the influence of cartoons on children within the context of Ghana. However, there is a need to more particularly investigate the specific benefits and adverse impacts of

cartoons on children's behavior with a larger sample size than used by this study. Further, other researchers interested in this area of study could explore the options of how cartoons could be used to encourage pro-social behaviors and facilitate learning among children.

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