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Parental Mediation Strategies in the Use of Videogames by Children: A Panacea for Curtailing Negative Influence

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Abstract:
Videogames have become a popular form of entertainment that is both enjoyed by adults and children. Studies have proven that there are negative effects of videogames on its users which has become worrisome especially as its users are children as well. Concerns have been raised about the objectionable nature of some of the contents which glamorize violence and sex. The issue of parental mediation therefore is crucial as children have been found to have access to these videogames. The mediation would help to moderate negative effects of this media and possibly harness its positive effects for the benefit of the children. This study therefore looks at various concepts that have to do with children and their use of videogames, children and childhood, parenting and parent-child interaction and parents' mediation in children's videogame use. The study suggests among others that videogame content providers should include age specification and parental advisory which would form as a guide for sensitizing parents and guardians on the need for mediation in their children's use of videogames

Keywords: Videogame use, children, parental mediation, negative effects

1. Introduction

Among the interactive media that have gained much popularity in contemporary times are videogames. This class of media is by its very nature and purpose necessarily interactive as the audience is expected to play; to act as a player, being challenged to accomplish some task as successfully as possible (Traudt, 2005; Dell, 2013; Mill, 2015; Nash, 2015). Videogames use has become quite popular in Nigeria (Okoye, 2011; Adetunji, 2013; Omo, 2015). However, with the Internet and mobile phones, access to videogames has gained so much impetus (Adetunji, 2013). Most smart phones come with inbuilt videogames while computer sets equally offer videogames platform once the proper software is installed (Peters, 2010; Russell, 2016). All these have ensured that videogames have become a ubiquitous component of relaxation culture among young people in Nigeria (Okoye, 2011; Adetunji, 2013; Omo, 2015).

While videogames content is on the surface lifeless ("dead") – made up of animations – it can nevertheless never lay claim to innocence or ideological neutrality (Traudt, 2005; Nash, 2015). Like other forms of popular culture, videogames are embodiments of ideologies as the images and sounds are deployed for advancing certain viewpoints often in ways that are too subtle to be obvious (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Nash, 2015). For instance, ideologies related to gender and which have characteristically objectified women (in the sexual sense) have been discovered in many videogames (Dietz, 2009; Beasley & Standley, 2002). The same applies to ideologies that promote and even glamorize violence and naked power (Anderson, 2002; Panee & Ballard, 2002; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002). Children who play videogames inevitably come in contact with these objectionable ideological persuasions whose danger is even further heightened by the subtle and implied manner of their presentation (Traudt, 2005).

2. Concern for Children's Interactive Media Use

Children's use of the media has often provoked concern given the fear that their suggestible mind renders them much more vulnerable to harm emanating from media content (Daramola, 2010; McQuail, 2010; Peters, 2010; Russell, 2016). This concern has given rise to attempts to regulate children's media use through measures like restricting content that can be broadcast during family belt hours and classifying films as not suitable for children (Mba, 2006; Okoye, 2011; Omo, 2015). However, the advent of the interactive media introduces a new challenge here being that such media tend not to be amenable to the conventional restricting measures given their user-controlled orientation (Dietz, 2009; Traudt, 2005; Peters, 2010; Russell, 2016). For videogames in particular, a user basically has the leverage to navigate through an array of contents as long as the device is firmly in their hands (Dietz, 2009; Traudt, 2005; Okoye, 2011; Peters, 2010; Adetunji, 2013; Omo, 2015). This situation challenges parents and guardians in their quest to shield their wards from undesirable effects of media exposure.

Videogames in particular poses a significant concern as its own problems as its content can range from the most decent to the most outrageous by way of violence, destruction and sexual explicitness (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Nash, 2015; Dietz, 2009; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Anderson, 2002; Panee & Ballard, 2002; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002). All this underscores the added risk which interactive media tend to pose to the quest to ensure positive social development of children in a modern society like Nigeria.

The increasing accessibility of children to videogames and the autonomous space which videogames afford children to determine on their own the content they engage with in these games present a particular challenge to parenting. Agba (2001) posits that the advancements in the ICTs are "increasingly presenting new challenges to parents in their quest to remain in control of what their children learn" (p.119). This thesis is arguably very true of the interactive media given their user-controlled orientation that in some respect largely exclude "outside" interference. Consequently, one may become concerned as to the extent parents may be able to wade through this obstacle of "user autonomy" to mediate in their children's use of such potentially harmful technologies. In a patriarchal society like Nigeria, it is commonly perceived that children who turn out to be responsible in life are to be identified with the father while those that become deviants are presumably seen to belong to the mother. (Adigwe, 2012). Mothers therefore work tirelessly to ensure that their children are adequately nurtured and raised to avoid societal embarrassment. Equally relevant here again, is the generational factor, as people tend to be more aware of innovations that occurred early enough in their generation than ones that came relatively late (Dix, Finlay, Abowd & Beale, 2004). So, it is possible that many parents in Nigeria might have met videogames not so early in their lives, meaning that they might to any extent be out of touch with this technology; a situation that may adversely affect their capacity to effectively and knowledgably mediate in their children's encounter with them towards preventing their negative and harnessing their positive impact on their social development.

3. Children and Childhood: A Conceptualisation

Traditionally, childhood appears to have been understood basically in a biological sense whereby age and the attendant physical changes are the primary determinant of childhood. Thus, childhood becomes a matter of how old one is (Beauregard, Ozbilgin & Bell, 2009). For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as "a human being below the age of 18 years." However, this Convention still recognises that adulthood may be attained earlier than 18 years under particular legal contexts. There appears to be a dominant culture of viewing childhood as beginning from birth and ending once one crosses over to 18 years (Hembacher & Frank, 2014). In Nigeria, the Child Rights Act defines a child as "a person under the age of eighteen years" (s.277).

However, the 18 years benchmark is not absolute as benchmarks may vary depending on the context. For instance, the official United Nations definition of a child in the context of military service is 14 years and below. In other words, one who is not up to 15 years is considered incapable of military service, and recruiting him/her for such amounts to child soldiering; a crime under the international law (Plante, 2010). Similarly, childhood age differs from country to country as far as giving sexual consent is concerned. A chid is considered incapable of giving sexual consent such that any sexual act with him/her legally amounts to rape; but the age of who is a child in this context differs from country to country. In Nigeria, it is 17 years and below but in some other jurisdictions the age is lower (Rishante & Yakubu, 2014).

Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest and research into the geographies of children and childhood (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Here, the ways in which children give meaning to their everyday environments, be they rural or urban, near or far from networks of relatives and how children engage in and with these local environments form a significant part of how children's lives are negotiated (Francis-Connolly, 2011; Martins & Abreu, 2014). Structural relations between children and adults are important; however, children do not form a homogenous group. Socio-cultural factors like class, gender, ethnicity, nationality all have social and material effects on their everyday experiences (Renold, 2005; Scour Field *et al.*, 2006; Connolly, 2008). Societal expectations of children from particular socio-economic and cultural backgrounds will strongly affect how people respond to children and how these children develop their own sense of self. Sociological approaches exploring social identities, relationships and cultures have developed significantly in the field of childhood studies (Unachukwu & Ebenebe, 2007; Martins & Abreu, 2014; Hembacher & Frank, 2014).

The above discourse reveals that childhood is not a simple and static phenomenon, but a complex category with biological and cultural components. Its complex and dynamic nature means that no single perspective may prove completely satisfactory in explaining the nature, functioning and moral imperatives of childhood. Consequently, the discourse of childhood, like other social discourses, rests on divergent perspectives. The implication of this is that questions such as that of parents' mediation in children's use of videogames are better answered within the specific understanding of childhood and its implications as upheld in any given cultural context such as that of Nigeria.

4. Parenting/Parent-Child Interaction

Both child development and parent-child interactions are conditioned by social structure. Families that are embedded in society have greater resources to invest in children resulting in quality interactions and non-problematic behaviour (Giordano, 2009). Conversely, families that are isolated from the labour market, impoverished and stigmatized will have fewer social and material resources to invest in their children. The result will be weaker-parent-child bonds and greater behaviour problems exhibited by the children (Francis-Connolly, 2011; Martins & Abreu, 2014).

5. Children and Videogames

Children's access to interactive media has been an important concern in new media literature. In the western world, children easily have access to computer and related platforms including social media and videogames (McQuail,

2010; O'Connor, 2011). Access to smart phones is also common among children in this part of the world (O'Connor, 2011). Statistics show that most children in the United States, for instance, have access to smart phones, whether it belongs to them personally or available in their family (O'Connor, 2011; Prot, Anderson, Gentile, Brown & Swing, 2014).) and that these children access a wide range of content including interactive platforms like social media and videogames. This widespread access is attributed to the penetration of electronic culture as well as socio-economic variables that ensure that most families can afford the finances to get these gadgets for their kids (McQuail, 2010; O'Connor, 2011; Prot *et al.,* 2014).

However, videogames availability is not basically dependent on the availability of the Internet technology. Though its functioning is computerized, videogames technology exists separately from the Internet technology, notwithstanding that the Internet has become an important source of videogames content nowadays (Traudt, 2005; McLean & Griffiths, 2013). This explains the fact that videogames access predates Internet access in Nigeria (Osuagwu, 2015). Starting from the 1990s, Play Station, a videogames console manufactured by the Japanese electronics giant, Sonny, began to grow in popularity in Nigeria. This product, which has continued to be upgraded over the years, offers a variety of playing content including football, fighting and other tasks. Young people of various ages including children have been known to play this videogame (Osuagwu, 2015; Onwukwe *et al.*, 2017).

However, there has been a much more availability of videogames content in the country with the growing computer, mobile and Internet culture (Okoro, Nwafor & Odoemelam, 2015; Osuagwu, 2015; Onwukwe *et al.*, 2017). The increasing access by children to these technologies (Osuagwu, 2015) will also imply that they are increasingly having access to videogames, at least in theory. Against this backdrop, the question is: what could be the implication of such access to interactive media by children; what is the possible effect on them?

5.1. Effect of Videogames on Children

The question of effect of the communication media has been much problematic. Media effect is hardly straightforward; it is a complex process involving the contributory activities of a nexus of variables of biological, psychological and sociological nature (McQuail, 2010; Pottter, 2012). The same scenario applies to interactive media such as videogames (Traudt, 2005; McLean, & Griffiths, 2013). Thus, the question of the effect of interactive media on children has not yielded itself to any easy answer; cognizance must be taken of the special characteristics of children, their environment and other contextual variables in discussing this issue. One thing that has been made certain, however, is that the effect of interactive media, just as with other media forms, could be both positive and negative, desirable and undesirable. Thus, while many scholars and stakeholders have advocated for integration of interactive media such as interactive books and toys, computer games and the internet to the list of learning tools available to children due to their capacity for positive influence, others have called for caution in view of their potentials for negative impact (Cordes & Miller, 2000; Adigwe, 2012). Thus, interactive media, including videogames, may be viewed as a double-edged sword in terms of their impact on children which will be discuss Videogames have become a popular pastime for children of all ages since its introduction in the 1970s (Anderson & Warburton, 2012). Recent scientific findings show that helpful and pro-social computer games content has great potential for enhancing the lives of children but exposure to anti-social and violent games increases the likelihood of a range of negative outcomes with greater exposure increasing the risks (Anderson & Warburton, 2012). Granic Lobel and Engels (2013), however, observe that the vast majority of psychological research on the effects of gaming has focused on its negative impact; the potential harm related to aggression, addiction and depression. But the authors argue that in order to understand the impact of computer games on children's development, a more balanced perspective is needed. Thus, Ferguson and Olson (2013) reason that considering the potential benefits of videogames playing is important in part because the nature of these games changed dramatically in the last decade, becoming increasingly complex, diverse, realistic and social in nature. It has been shown that playing games promotes a wide range of cognitive skills such as faster and more accurate attention allocation, higher spatial resolution in visual processing and enhanced mental rotation abilities (Green & Bavelier, 2012; Lobel & Engels, 2013).

Ferguson and Olson (2013) argue that videogames exposure may present opportunities for meeting basic human needs whether or not the needs are easily met within the real world. For example, competence needs may be seen as being met by videogames given that they offer a platform for achieving victories, successes and getting one to be good at something. In regard to social relationship needs, it has been suggested that computer games may provide opportunities for children to connect socially through game play. In the aspect of autonomy need, it has been said that children may use computer games as an outlet where they may feel as if they have some control and even powerful, perhaps in ways that are not possible in the real world (Ferguson & Olson, 2013).

Videogames are noted to enhance the confidence level of children when they start mastering the games. Again, children also develop good hand-eye coordination over a period of time with videogames. They learn some essential skills like strategic thinking, innovative thinking and cooperation. Through gaming, children also develop investigative skills and get engaged in brain tasking activities that require all their senses to be effective and alert (Hudley, 2001). Videogames are also thought to be responsible for developing mathematical and engineering skills in children. Most games encourage children to move on to the next level and earn more scores in order to win or survive the game. This factor works positively amongst children (Green & Bavalier, 2003; Anderson *et al.,* 2012). Furthermore, because computer games are creative and fun-intended, it is believed to offer a chance to foster the creativity potential amongst children. Games distract users from their existing stress, providing them with fun and entertainment value (Anderson *et al.,* 2012).

On the other hand, there has also been much concern regarding the possible negative effect of videogames on children. Several researchers have examined the short-term impact of violent computer game play of children from four to

10 years old. Their results suggest that playing violent computer games encourage relatively immediate increase in aggressive behaviour, attitudes and thoughts but only in short term (Lineberger, 2009; Anderson, 2002; Panee & Ballard, 2002; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002). It is believed that during the formative years, engagement with computer games can create distorted views of society and the acceptability of certain behaviours. Children who spend too much time with the computer game may be inclined to attempt to initiate the dangerous stunts they see. Consequently, contents of interactive media including violent, sexual or commercial content may influence the children's attitudes and behaviours (Okoro *et al.*, 2015; Okoro *et al.*, 2015; Osuagwu, 2015; Onwukwe *et al.*, 2017; Onyemaka *et al.*, 2017).

Apart from moral harms, videogames are feared to have the potential to expose children to emotional disturbances. These may include phobia, obsession, and paranoia amongst others (Dietz, 2009; Beasley & Standley, 2002). It has been generally established that exposure to disturbing images constitutes a risk of emotional instability to young people (McLean, & Griffiths, 2013).

6. Parents' Mediation in Children's Videogames Use

From the discussion so far, it is clear that numerous claims have been made about videogames, the increasingly young age at which children begin to interact with them and the possible effect on their development (Adigwe, 2012; Ali & Aliyu, 2015; Alio & Aneke, 2011). However, it is known in scholarship that children don't experience media in a vacuum as their environment shapes the nature of their experience with the media (McLean, & Griffiths, 2013). For instance, past studies on the impact of television (such as Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Odukomaiya, 2014; Rishante & Yakubu, 2014) indicate that immediate family such as parents and siblings heavily influence what children take away from the viewing experience. In the same vein, family environment also provides a key context for how young children experience computers and interactive media (McLean, & Griffiths, 2013). Thus, factors like the parents' economic background, educational status, religious backgrounds and beliefs and perceptions regarding the desirability and effect of particular forms of the media or content tend to influence the extent and nature of children's experience in regard to such media or content (Beauregard *et al.*, 2009). Basically, the extent of parents' awareness and their perception of the effects of media on children have been found to significantly influence their response to their children's exposure to such media.

7. Children's Media Use and Parents' Mediation Strategies

Electronic and interactive media have become an integral part of everyday life, especially welcomed by young people (Griffiths, 2010). It is not surprising that the potential effects of excessive media use and sexually explicit or violent content on children and their development have drawn immense public attention. First and foremost, it is the parents and caregivers who are worried about media influence and therefore seek to actively regulate media use in consistency with family norms and standards (Gentile *et al.,* 2011). There is a great anxiety about the possible harms to children being exposed to online pornography and other controversial contents. Nevertheless, research has indicated that because parents are usually aware of both the benefits and risks of their children being exposed to videogames, they tend to be ambivalent, torn between permitting their kids access and restricting them (Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Living Stone, 2007).

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Chakroff and Nathanson (2008) note that there are three major forms of parental media control: restrictive controls, active controls and cooperative controls. Restrictive controls, according to Padilla-Walker and Coyne (2010), comprise rules or restrictions aimed at sheltering children from the media. Rules may involve, for instance, the amount of time a child is allowed on the Internet or computer games. For computer games, an American study found restrictive control to be the dominating parental strategy in families with younger children and for parents who were afraid of the additive effects (Valkenburg, Kremar, Peeters & Marseille, 2009).

Active controls, on the other hand, refer to parents explaining to and discussing media or specific media contents with children. In this process, parents may, for instance, guide the children's media consumption by providing information on news reports, game shows, educational programming or computer games. It may also involve parents' explanations of the difference between reality and fiction. Active mediation increases children's scepticism towards social media contents (Austin, Bolls, Fujioka & Engelbertson, 2009).

Cooperative controls (also referred to as co-use controls) involve co-viewing and co-playing; this time parents accompany children's interactive media consumption (for instance, by playing computer games with the child). Unlike active control, co-use does not include explicit discussions. Co-use can either be passive (for example, when the parent enters the room when the child is playing computer games or vice versa) or intentional when the parents ask to join their children in what they are doing (Clarks, 2011).

Clarks (2011), however, concludes that due to the increasing presence of media in everyday life and the insistent demand of children to use media, parental involvement with media consumption is an important aspect in mediation in

general, irrespective of whether mediation strategies are otherwise dominated by restriction controls, active controls or co-use controls.

Asides the practical control measures and steps taken by parents to monitor their children's media usage, there are also other forms of control, that come with the media product itself to help checkmate children's use of interactive media. This form of control are software and service tools that are designed to help parents and guardians monitor their children's use of mobile phones, computers and other smart devices they use to play games. This parental control measure is associated with user accounts, which is the account one's children log on to with the computer/mobile device. These parental controls, according to Livingstone (2007), fall into roughly four categories which are; content filters, which limit access to age-inappropriate contents; usage controls, which constrain the usage of these smart devices such as placing time limits on usage or forbidding certain types of usage; monitoring controls, which can track location and activity when using the devices. Livingstone (2007) asserts that mobile phone service provides these four options of controlling privacy and usage, filtering content and location and monitoring settings. These parental controls have indeed gone a long way to ensuring a child's safety as he/she uses videogames and other forms of interactive media.

8. Recommendations

The following recommendations are further suggested towards helping parents minimise the negative impact videogames may have on children and assisting them in harnessing its positive attributes:

- Schools should work towards integration of videogames as part of multimedia learning tools. This will serve as a positive mediation strategy that will complement home-based mediation and ensure children benefit from videogames in all relevant aspects of their social development.
- There may also be the need for inclusion of videogames literacy in media literacy education offered in schools, particularly in the earliest stages of schooling. This will help complement parental mediation and protect children from possible negative influence of videogames while assisting them towards harnessing their positive influence.
- Videogames content providers may also be made to include classification information on their content. Such classification information will include age specification and parental advisory. This will not only serve as a form of sensitising parents and guardians on the need for mediation in their children's videogames use, but will also guide them towards informed and effective mediation.
- Schools should work towards integration of videogames as part of multimedia learning tools. This will serve as a positive mediation strategy that will complement home-based mediation and ensure children benefit from videogames in all relevant aspects of their social development.

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