ANIMATED CARTOONS IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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Abstract: The present study aimed at getting a view on the animated cartoons by children and mothers. The focus of the study was on understanding how animated cartoons play a role in capturing children's imagination. This was done by recording their perceptions and responses towards the animation films. The sample consisted of 40 children for the screening and there were 30 participants for the in-depth study. The in-depth study was conducted on 20 children (6-7years) and 10 mothers. The children were taken from two settings of government and public school. Data was collected by means of interview schedules for children and parents. The findings of the study revealed that the factors most liked by children were humour and action/ movements. Children got attracted to these aspects of the animated cartoon and aspired to be like the characters. Mostly children liked those characters who were away from reality and who did extraordinary things like flying. They also liked the helping nature of the characters. Parents found cartoons to be an important part of children's daily life. All of them wanted cartoons to provide some kind of information to the children so that they can get some value and useful information.

Index Terms – **Animation, engagement, imagination.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Television uses 'language' or a symbol system which differs in many important ways from that of books, spoken language or even film (Saloman & Campo, 1981). It is one of the mediums to communicate something visually and can be accompanied by additional features of sound effects, music and other things. It captures the attention of everyone irrespective of their developmental stage. The preferences and the level of understanding may differ according to the stage. For children in particular animated cartoons form a major part of their daily life. They are not only entertaining but also educational in nature. In animation "Anything and everything can turn into anything and the children love it for its illogical presentation." Animation has an element of surprise and wonderment that appeal to children. It can be used effectively in the illustrations of some phenomena which are difficult to explain otherwise (Rahman, 1974). Animated cartoons generally consist of superheroes, adventures of child protagonists and others which are meant specifically for the audience consisting of children but there are many cartoons which are also seen by adults and considered as a source of entertainment by them. Cartoons in which animals or even inanimate objects are endowed with human behaviour capture the child's attention (Biaggio, 1981).

1.1 History of animation

The animated cartoons began in America in 1906. The first one to come was 'Humorous Phases of Funny Faces'. It was released by Vitagraph, cartoonist James Stuart Blackton. In India the production of cartoons dates back to 1956 when the cartoon film unit of the Films Division of the Ministry of Information was formed. The main people behind it were G.K Ghokhale and the former Disney animator Clair Welks. The first animated cartoon that came out was 'The Banyan Tree', based on a Buddhist Jataka story (Beck, 2004). There are many people from India who have been working in this area and have been constantly creating animation. One of the main persons behind Indian animation films is Ram Mohan (Beck, 2004).

1.2 Influence of media

Most of the things that we see around us are influenced by media. Over the years media has played a major role in the understanding and comprehension of things around us. It invariably determines how we act and respond in various situations. It plays a major role in building attitudes and beliefs about various things. Lull (1988) talks about television viewing as a conscious decision to switch on the TV set, watch a selected programme and interpret its meaning in a manner which is unique to every viewer. Thus, each child would interpret the meaning of what he/she is watching in his/her unique way. For children this is especially true in case of interpreting the animation which they watch. There are mixed views in relation to how it can be used as a powerful medium on one hand and how its inappropriate content would have a negative impact on the child on the other hand. According to Ponnuswami (2002), in contrast to what the elders believe the children are not easily fooled by media. Instead, if the society holds strong ideals and they are lived rather than being preached then a TV programme will not be able to erase the ideals set by society.

1.3 Attraction towards animation

Children of all age groups beginning from as early as 2 years enjoy watching animation films. Usually preschoolers (2-7 years) are the most targeted audience and children between 7-11 years follow close behind. Animated cartoons include different content, storyline and the speed/intensity that are supposed to cater to different age groups. Preschool children are likely to respond strongly to a single feature in a television or a movie scene, like a character's red dress or a hero's shiny weapon. This is due to egocentrism and centration, the primary characteristics of children's cognitive development during this stage. The children believe that others also think and believe in the same way as they do. Although preschoolers actively search for meaning in the television content, they are still especially attracted to vivid production features (the "formal features" of television programs), such as rapid character movement, rapid changes of scene and character, varied settings, intense or unexpected sights and sounds, loud music, and peculiar or nonhuman voices (Josephson, 1995).

1.4 Impact of watching cartoons

Animated cartoons have been considered to have both positive and negative impact on children. Imitation is considered to be one outcome of watching cartoons. Some believe that negative impact is more pronounced as the effects are more visible than the impact of the positive aspects of the animated cartoons. It is said that viewing violent program by children decreases the behaviour such as self control, tolerance of frustration, reduction in the cooperating, helping and sharing behaviour (Mussen, Conger & Kagan, 1979). Hossler (2004), elaborated on children experiencing more mental and emotional problems if they watch too much cartoons. However, some cartoons promote a healthy and encouraging attitude towards life. Cartoons like Popeye show that eating spinach gives physical strength to the body. Recently cartoon network has planned to take out a series of cartoons called the Elfy Foods that champions healthy eating for children (Bulkley, 2005).

1.5 Parental engagement and view

Family plays a very important role in determining what the child understands from watching a particular cartoon. One important thing is how parents communicate with their children and how this interacts with the way the television set is used in the home. Gunter and Aleer (1990) noticed that the children are socialized into particular styles of television viewing as a result of the parental control and disciplinary practices at home. Parents not only influence the child's television viewing but also the behaviour. Co-viewing with parents results in regulation and mediation of television viewing of children. They may determine how much television the child would watch or even the kind of programmes that s/he watched. This would eventually control the impact that television would have on children and socialize them to watch programmes that parents consider appropriate (Gunter & Aleer, 1990; Shah & Shastri, 1997).

II RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section describes how the study was conducted. It includes the details of the sample, sample size, selection of sample, tools for data collection and method of analysis. The details are as follows:

2.1 Population and Sample

There were a total of 40 participants for the screening which included children between 6 to 7 years of age. For the in-depth study there were a total of 30 participants which included 20 children from the selected sample, and 10 parents.

2.2 Sample Selection

Convenience sampling was used to identify the two schools. In both the government school and the public school children were selected on the basis of convenience sampling for the screening. For the in-depth study the children were selected on the basis of convenience from the screening group. The mothers of ten children were selected based on both purposive and convenience sampling.

2.3 Data and Sources of Data

For this study the data was collected through a screening tool for 40 students followed interview with 20 children. Along with this, ten parents were interviewed on their views about the animation films and the relation to children.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data gathered was descriptive in nature and was subjected to content analysis. Themes were taken out from the coded responses and based on that analysis was done.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Preference and perception of cartoons

Preference of cartoons was visible in the responses of the children. 19 (N=40) children said that the most preferred cartoon was Tom and Jerry. It was preferred because of its humorous content. The act of running by the two characters was liked by most 21 children. As indicated by Lesser (1974) and Josephson (1995), humour and character movement are appealing to children and are liked by them. High preference and appeal was seen for programmes which have action in them, Tom and Jerry being a perfect example of such a case. Noddy and Doremon were also mentioned as being favourites by some children. Noddy was liked because he helps others and drives a car while Doremon was liked because he can fly and has different gadgets with him . The other cartoons included Oswald, Spiderman, Shinchan, Powerpuff girls, and Beyblade which were individual choices for some children.

There were also different preferences for languages in which the children wanted to watch cartoons. 27 (N=40) children said that they would prefer to watch cartoons in Hindi. The reason for watching cartoons in Hindi was that children felt that they could understand Hindi, it was easier and they knew the language. Twelve children said that they would prefer watching in English because they enjoy watching it. Children from both the government and public school had similar responses and no specific language preference emerged from any of the settings. 18 (n=20) children felt that cartoons were not real and two of them felt that they are real. The most common reason that was elicited was that they were computer based. All the children (n=20) in the in-depth study liked watching cartoons.

3.1.1 Viewing and regulation of children's television

There were many factors which governed the type of show watched by children and the duration of watching of the show. Most children reported watching cartoon with someone. It was either a sibling, mother and in two cases uncle and a servant. Very few children (4) reported watching the cartoon alone. 10 (n=20) children shared that they could watch television anytime of the day while the other children had fixed TV viewing hours. On probing it was found that one of the family member regulated TV viewing for all children except three. It was interesting to note that in most cases it was the mother who regulated the TV viewing time. This was noted to be a trend for the public-school children. The children in the government school reported that their fathers regulated the television viewing time. Thus, it was found that different individuals are carrying out the regulation of television viewing time

in the two settings. Parental regulation was cited as one of the reasons for not watching cartoons the whole day. Thus, it can be seen that there are variations in adult regulation. In some cases there is co-viewing of television which generally happens with the siblings. However, as reported by children there was high monitoring of their TV viewing habits by the parents.

3.1.2 Aspirations connected to cartoons

Children not only liked but also aspired to become like the characters in the cartoons. The most popular ones were Jerry, Superman, Noddy. The reasons for such aspirations were different for each character and there was no common feature of a character which elicited these responses. Children wanted to be like Jerry because he was cute, had cheese and hits Tom. Children wanted to be like Superman because he could fly, he could fight and helped others. It was noticed that the favourite character were not necessarily from the favourite cartoons as reported by children. As Soni (1995) puts it "Fantasy is an important component to help the child retain connective possibilities with reality."

3.2 Parental engagement and view

Eight (n=10) mothers felt that cartoons are good for children. They felt that they are interesting, children learn different things. There were two mothers who reported that there was nothing positive about the cartoons being watched by children and minimum amount should be watched. There are various notions regarding what the mothers wanted their children to watch and what according to them constitutes an ideal cartoon. According to the mothers' an ideal cartoon is the one in which children learn something, has good stories and is morally high in content. They also pointed out to the importance of having reduced violence or show violence as a means of self defence and should be mythology based. Few mothers also said that the original version of the cartoons must be shown for a better understanding of the animated cartoons. They felt that the dubbed version should not be shown to the children unless the language is appropriately used.

3.2.1 Perception of adults regarding children's understanding

All the mothers felt that their children understood the content of cartoons. Some mothers felt this since their children discussed about what they watched with them. However, some mothers did not know about what children liked and did not discuss with them about what they were watching. One mother said that the child may understand the content of the cartoon but may not be able to understand the theme on which that cartoon is based. Few mothers also reported that children liked some kind of message in the story. They liked something which is funny, something that they can relate to.

3.2.2 Monitoring and regulation of the content

According to majority of the mothers, the children actively engage in imitating what they see on television. Some mothers reported that children often imitate the actions and replicate those on their siblings. One mother also emphasized that she had made a pact with the children that they can watch the cartoon till the time they don't imitate the actions of the character.

3.2.3. Involvement with children

Most mothers of children studying in government school were not aware of the content being watched by the children. Mothers of children studying in public school were more aware and some of them even watched the cartoon with their children. Most of the mothers reported that children watched cartoons while they were free, while eating food, or while the mother was busy doing something. Two mothers reported that their children watched while studying and one while playing indoor games. According to the mothers the children were generally accompanied by their siblings or watched the television alone. This was a finding which emerged in the children's responses also.

4.1 CONCLUSION

The study revealed the preference of children and view point of parents about the animated cartoons. Children found humour and actions in the cartoon to be most attractive. Parents found cartoon as a medium for providing knowledge and information to the children. However, some expressed their views regarding the violence in the current animated cartoons. It could be seen that mothers were fine with children watching cartoons till they are monitored regarding the content of the cartoon. The time and content of the cartoons that children watched was regulated. Viewing different forms of animation is part of growing up for children. Thus, it is important to see the content being watched and the value it adds for children and their lives.

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