

Cartoon films and its impact on children's mentality

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ABSTRACT

Cartoons are the most popular entertainment means for children. Principally in cartoons, the fights and rivalries between the protagonist and the antagonist dominate the entire storyline. They follow the protagonist to achieve his goals, usually of the good over the evil.

The magic of cartoon films lies in bringing fantasy to life or in near life situations. Since cartoon films became mainstream on TV over a century ago, several generations of children (teens, adults, senior citizens too) have grown up watching cartoon films. Many girls have fantasized about being a beautiful princess and many boys have imagined themselves to brave fighters and kings.

This paper throws light on the multitude of subtle and hidden messages conveyed through the cartoons, most usually unsaid explicitly. There are gender biases, gender stereotyping, sudden violence, unnatural falls and unexpected recoveries without injuries, all affecting children minds. Children are in a fix to accept these as routine observations in cartoon films and try co-relating these in real life situations, where they do not fit in. The children often find it difficult to come out of the fantasy world and if not guided through these experiences wisely can affect their mental wellbeing.

1. Introduction

The year is 2020, the first quarter has just ended and the Covid-19 pandemic has set in. So has the lockdown and all folks, or most of the Sane, folks are locked indoors. Working people have adapted the work from home options, housewives busy coping and cooking with the whole family being indoors 24 hours, while children are happy as their exams are cancelled.

This free time with summer outside the house is a good time to sit in front of the TV and pass time, with no option to go outdoors. There are plenty of TV channels, running children's cartoons which entertain the teens and adolescents, grownups to senior citizens alike. In the age of steaming media by the Over The Top (OTT) carriers that broadcast different cartoons for children round the clock, with the person holding the remote control deciding which ones to watch and how many times.

Children in yester years spent the majority of their daily time in outdoor activities engaging in playing with their friends and peers playing various games. In contrast children of today prefer watching their favorite cartoon films on TV. They sit or lie in front of the TV for many hours, with neither any physical activity nor any peer socializing. Children are increasingly attached to cartoons in recent years and it has become the major main pastime activity for them.

Children are exposed to cartoons on television at an early age of as less as six months. By the child becomes two or three years of age, they are already become or they have already become regular and enthusiastic audience of cartoon films. Cartoon films have become an integral part of children's daily habits.

Studies have indicated that children who regularly watch cartoons are observed to have an increased rate of language acquisition. Children are also known to exhibit violent and aggressive behavior with their friends, peers and siblings at

home too. A famous quotation of cartoon character Winnie the Pooh, says "Sometimes the smallest things can take up the most room in your heart."

2. The cartoon watching culture

The origin of animated cartoons is disputed. (Alison Nastasi 2011) attributes the French caricature artist Émile Cohl, to be the father of the world's first animated cartoon in the year 1908. It is a black-and-white short film named *Fantasmagorie* and was made up of around 700 drawings which were illuminated on a glass plate. The animated movie was prepared by photographing black lines on white paper and then reversing the negatives of the films to make it look like white on black. We have come a long way from then to now when animated cartoons are prepared on computers with software's and are realistic as equivalent to real life.

Children are the primary targeted consumers of cartoon films. Children tend to watch cartoons at any time of the day, and even the same film is watched multiple times. (Lin, C. A. 2001) has indicated that once children are aware of the cartoon films, they repeatedly play the films with high periodicity. Although this work was based on observations using the VCR, vis-à-vis the television content the same holds true today too.

As per the Kaiser Family Foundation Report (1999), children between the age group of two to pre-teens watch around 2.5 to 3 hours of carton films on TV every day. Older kids, those who are 8 years or older spend about 6.5 hours a day using some form of media. Only 5% of kids spend an hour a day or less with any form of media.

Preschool children are noted to squander more time watching cartoon films than do kids going to high school (Bryant 2001). It is evidently clear that the exposure to media has a large influence on children developing beliefs and values.

(Signorielli and Bacue 1999) in their study of 30-years of television content found that female characters are under-represented as compared to male characters. (Witt 2000) in his work found a larger ratio of around two-thirds of characters on television are male, which they have observed has been the same since the 1950s.

(Wiersma 2001), (Towbin et al. 2004) analyzed around sixteen animated films produced by Disney and reported that gender stereotyping has not evolved in synch with the changes that are observed in the society, but remained stereotypic and similar to the gender portrayals depicted from the first animated Disney cartoon film way back in 1937. The Majority of the protagonist characters in the animated films were Males.

Gender discrimination is usually seen to begin from inside the family and is affected by many external factors. Children's communication while in school, with peers, with their friends also leads to prejudiced attitudes being developed towards gender bias in their lives ahead. One of the key factors in children's internalization of gender stereotypes is the media (cartoon films) that they are exposed to repeatedly. Many cartoon films depict gender discrimination extensively. It is evident that the male gender is reflected as being dominant amongst the two.

As media increasingly becomes more a part of the daily life of children, children therapists will have to play an important role in helping parents manage the effects of the media in children. Therapists will have to tutor parents to help children in understanding and interpreting the embedded messages on gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes. It is required that the therapists should tutor parents to critically analyze the type of media content regularly watched by their wards. Without the assistance of parents, the interpretation of children, of what they are exposed in the media, will lead them to become passive recipients to these repetitive stereotyped messages, which eventually may lead to become firm beliefs.

It is desired that parents may watch the cartoon films with their children and engage in asking questions before, during, and after the film to increase their children's media literacy. Parents should understand the implied power of media and the messages that it sends to children. Parents may ask questions, such as – What messages are being conveyed through the media to girls and boys? Children will have to be made critical viewers at an early age, with the hope that the influence of media can be reduced. It has been reported that under the childlike appearances of the cartoon characters, the films have been observed to be depict gender stereotyping.

(Arma an Gökçearsan 2010) reports that, female characters are depicted at a status lower than males in cartoon films made before 1980. Male characters were depicted larger in number and appear more frequently. Male characters were prioritized. Children at their early ages get exposed to unequal representations of gender. It is also reported that animal and inanimate characters which are cast in many cartoons have anthropomorphic characteristics, which include walking on two feet, eating with hands (front appendages), speaking, etc. These characters are shown in these cartoon movies with human-like characteristics. Cartoon characters are even said to be designed on the basis of standard stereotypical male and female role models.

The protagonists in most of the cartoon programs are males. The ratio of male protagonist's verses female

protagonist's is highly skewed and include towards the male characters.

Children at these ages groups usually tend to have people of similar genders in their immediate surroundings as models. Girls take their mothers and boys take their fathers as role models and they tend to imitate and follow their behaviors. If there is nobody who can be taken as a model (if parents are separated or deceased), children usually take one of their favorite cartoon character as a model to replicate. These gender stereotypes which are evident in cartoon characters come into focus in terms of children who cannot differentiate between reality and fiction. (Barcus 1983) reported that there were 75% of characters being male and 21% female in children's cartoon films.

(Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos 1995) in their work have examined 175 cartoon films and reported that the number of male protagonists is more than female protagonists by a ratio of one third, while the number of other male characters in children's cartoons is nearly one fifth more than females. (Smith et al. 2014) Examined portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status in movies released during 2007 to 2014 over 700 films and have found that male characters dominate the scene over female characters.

(Edwin Michael et al. 2012) their work based on content analysis of movies report that if this problem of stereotyping persists, there is an almost certain chance that children and youngsters will without doubt have a biased view on gender roles. (Amna Ameer 2016) in their study of comparative analysis of Hollywood's six popular six animated movies report a drastic change is observed in the traits of the female characters. In earlier movies, female characters were portrayed as always in need of help, but they observed that female characters were shown to be more brave, strong, independent and closer to the real world.

(Gouri Malhotra et al. 2018) in their study investigated two present-day Indian cartoons from the point of view of the character's physical appearance, male or female roles in problem-solving, social roles and manners. They identified the stereotypically strong males are typically the hero and are the conflict resolvers and delimiting the females to aspect roles or supporting roles only.

3. Cartoon character Roles

The TV channels explored are the following -

- 1) Cartoon Network 2) Discovery Kids 3) Disney Channel
- 4) Disney Junior 5) Disney XD 6) Hungama 7) Nick 8) Nick JR.
- 9) Pogo 10) Sonic Nickelodeon

Based on how a character is portrayed in the cartoon film, the characters can be grouped and labeled as one of the following roles:

- 1) Protagonist 2) Antagonist / Antagonist's Henchman 3) Rival / Frenemy / Bully 4) Protagonist's Friend / Co-Worker / Ally / Side-kick 5) Protagonist's Family Member 6) Other Roles.

As per census data the gender ratio in India for males:females is 51.47:48.53, while the cartoon character ratio of males:females is 73:27. (Rozario et al. 2017) in their work have given a list of characters usually played by the male and female roles in cartoons. As per their observations 74.63% of

the kids cartoons depicted in India are simply voice-overs of non-India made cartoon films.

As indicated in (FICCI-KPMG, 2015).around 42% of all the cartoon films shown in India are imported from the USA. Japanese content being telecast on Indian television is on the rise and is second to the content adapted from USA.

(Merskin 2008) as children regularly watch television content, they are subconsciously absorbing the dominant ideology that is depicted to them. At this early age the critical skills and cognitive abilities of children are not completely developed. It is of great concern that children simply accept the TV depictions as truths from the real world.

(Shumaila Ahmed & Juliana Abdul Wahab 2014) investigated cartoon characters' gender ratio on Cartoon Network the popular cartoon channel during Jan-Jul 2013. They observed an imbalance between the male and female character representations in the cartoons. They found that the appearance and roles of male characters were more strong, active and aggressive while female characters were more socialized, beautiful and sexually attractive, weak and passive too.

(Cynthia Ebere-Anaba 2016) have reported that Disney films did have an effect on a child's perception of genders. They go on to explain the importance of a child's environment and family on their gender role perceptions.

(Sharmila Kayal & J. Seena 2019) have attempted to understand the social messages conveyed through cartoon movies. They depict how cartoon movies if properly made can convey the right messages to the masses including children.

(Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos 1997) interviewed children within age groups of 4 to 9 years to identify how they perceived the male and female characters in cartoon films. They report some interesting findings like, (a) the favorite cartoon of nearly half of the children was continuing adventure, (b) girls recognized that the behaviors of the male characters made an impact on girl characters; (c) the type of cartoon movie that was preferred by the children had an impact on their perceptions about cartoon characters.

(Olusola Samuel Oyero, Kehinde Opeyemi Oyesomi 2014) Conducted a survey and concluded that parents perceive that cartoons help children in increasing skills in spoken English, increasing good morals, along with keeping children busy. Some parents expressed that some cartoons could have negative influence on the children. It is thought to have some regulations for mitigating the negative aspects of cartoon films. It is recommended that parents should make a conscious effort to monitor the cartoon films watched by their children to ensure that it is appropriate to their age group.

(Rahim et al. 2014) worked on Malay language education in Malaysia and reported that educators should consider cartoons as a teaching tool in second language or foreign language learning. (Sara c. Hare 2018) studied 150 top-grossing full-length cartoon films. They report that there is no significant change over the years under consideration (from 1980 to 2016) to alter the gender balance in the cartoon represented in the animated films. (Steven J. Kirsh 2006) in the review paper indicates the effects of violence in cartoon movies on the aggressive behavior in youth. They go on to propose a mechanism for reducing the negative influence of cartoon violence on youth.

(Ghilzai et al. 2017) surveyed and interviewed children and their siblings and conclude that children mostly watch cartoons for the following reasons, 41 % for fun, 23 % for action, and 17% for learning. Few Children also exhibit anti-social behavior based on the long (read over) exposure of the TV for longer durations. Some 70% of children tend to imitate cartoons in their real life. Depiction of violence and aggressive behaviors in cartoons can lead to similarity in the children's behavior too.

4. Why Cartoons Have Animal Characters

(Richard Coyne 2012) have listed nine reasons why children like to see animals as characters in cartoons namely, (1) Almost human, (2) Symbiosis, (3) Darwinian, (4) Anthropological, (5) Jungian, (6) Matter out of place, (7) Exaggeration, (8) Metaphor, (9) Supremacy.

(Richard Coyne 2014) further went on to add the tenth reason as "getting animals to talk", to the prior list of nine reasons.







(Thuận Sarzynski 2018) from a designer / developers perspective, creating human character is difficult. About animals, you have access to a spectrum of shapes, colors and textures. Animal characters are easier to manage when you design your characters. Cartoon creators use the general culture and ideas that people have about animals, for example a cat trying to catch a mouse. Doing these things with real humans would be very difficult, but with animals it looks cute and funny.





Dogs are said to be man's best friend. Dogs rank in at number tree of most adopted pets by homes, second only to fishes at number one and cats at number two. Carton films on fish are very few but are abound on cats and dogs.

Cartoon films have depicted a multitude of animals as central characters namely - Cats, Dogs, Mouse, Duck, Squirrels, Bear, Canary, Pig, Wolf, Frog, Parrott, Chicken, etc.











Some cats and dogs have become famous as they are depicted in many carton films and children are connected with them. Table 1 depicts famous cats in cartoon films while Table 2 depicts famous dogs in cartoon films.

**Table – 1
Famous cats in cartoon films**

Garfield		Hello Kitty	
Tom		Pepé Le Pew	
Sylvester		Pink Panther	

Felix		Simba	
Heathcliff		Hobbes	

**Table – 2
Famous dogs in cartoon films**

Droopy		Scooby Doo	
Brian Griffin		Snoopy	
Goofy		Courage	
Odie		Muttley	
Pluto		Astro	

5. Why cartoon characters have four fingers?

Many viewers might have not noticed that many cartoon characters usually sport only four fingers on their hands. But once it is understood, it becomes evident all over in most of the cartoon characters, especially the ones who are humanlike characters. There is no clearly specified basis for why cartoons have four fingers. There are some very good reasons for it that, which date back to the good old days of animation. Before computers were used in making animated cartoons, artists drew cartoons by hand.

Drawing hands and fingers is the hardest part of the body to draw. Having hands with three spaced out fingers, with same

shape and size, and a thumb speeds up the creative process by 20%. (Elizabeth Adetula 2017) well explains by sketching characters with only four digits, it saved time and money per character. It also implies fewer fingers to animate.

There are some more reasons for this, as many of the cartoons have animal characters, and we as humans do not necessarily associate animals having five fingers on their limbs. In Walt Disney once said, "Using five fingers would have made Mickey's hands look like a bunch of bananas."

6. Effects of Cartoons on Children

(Rosil Sinha 2015) indicate that the magic of animation film actually lies in bringing fantasy to life. One of the ways of transforming imagination into reality is by utilizing and developing animal characters as depicted in cartoons.

The work lists five main reasons why cartoons have animals,

- (1) Animal characters help the narrative,
- (2) We can relate and identify,
- (3) Raising awareness and empathy,
- (4) Personhood is Universal,
- (5) Comic relief.

(Anisha Nair 2018) has reported the positive and negative effects of Cartoons on Children.

The positive effects are,

- (1) Helps Children Get an Early Start on Learning,
- (2) Helps in the Cognitive Development,
- (3) Helps in the Language Development,
- (4) Enhances Creativity,
- (5) Promotes Laughter and Relieves Stress,
- (6) Helps Kids Learn About Different Things.

The negative effects are,

- (1) Encourages Violence,
- (2) Promotes Unruly Behavior and Lack of Empathy,
- (3) Promotes the Use of Foul Language,
- (4) Encourages Unsocial Behavior,
- (5) May Lead to Health Problems Due to Sedentary Lifestyle,
- (6) Promotes Bad Role Models.

Tips for Parents to deal with the negative side effects of cartoons on a child,

- (1) Watch it with the children,
- (2) Curtail the hours of exposure,
- (3) Choose age appropriate or instructive cartoons,
- (4) Make children understand the difference between Cartoons and Reality,
- (5) Use appropriate Filtering and Monitoring Applications.

7. Conclusion

It can very well be concluded that under the pretty cute and seemingly innocent characters and the stories of the cartoon characters, there lies an ocean of hidden traits. There are social messages of gender disparity, and social stereotyping.

On one hand cartoons help the children to learn, enjoy, keep themselves entertained, but can also lead them to be

more violent, aggressive and restless. The way children interpret cartoons is to be studied in detail to understand the long lasting effects that cartoons have on children's minds.

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