ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Influence of Violent Cartoon Contents on Children's Behaviour: A Study of *Tom And Jerry*

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Abstract

This study was carried out to determine the extent to which children react to cartoon contents of "Tom and Jerry" in two folds: firstly, to find out how children's behaviour is influenced by the contents of "Tom and Jerry" cartoon and, secondly, to find out the benefits children derive from watching "Tom and Jerry". The Social Learning Theory was adopted as the framework of the study. A survey research design was employed using the questionnaire as the data collection instrument. The study targeted the children and parent population of Jos metropolis, consisting of Jos North and Jos South LGAs of Plateau State Nigeria. The chosen sample size was 350, determined through purposive sampling using Taro Yamane's sample size formula. Simple percentage was used to analyse the data collated. The findings confirmed that the contents of "Tom and Jerry" cartoons influence children's behaviours negatively though children also derive benefits educationally from the contents of "Tom and Jerry" cartoons. It was thus recommended that since entertainment television plays an important role in shaping children's social behaviour, it is important that stakeholders regulate the content of television programmes in order to combat the negative influences that it might have on its viewers especially children who are generally vulnerable. The study further suggested that since children who watch "Tom and Jerry" cartoons derive benefits from watching it, Government as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), etc. should encourage cartoon producers to develop indigenous cartoons to incorporate the aspects that benefit children more so as to improve children development through entertainment programmes like cartoons.

Key words: Violent Cartoon, Contents, Children Behaviour, Tom and Jerry

Introduction

Investigations by many scholars notably the American Paediatrics Association have led to the recognition that entertainment television has become a major teaching agent and, therefore, plays a widely unrecognized but potent influence on the development of children (Muss, 1999). Some researchers have also opined that the media is one of the factors that today affect the way teenagers dress, talk, walk or even influence the type of music, movies they watch or what happens in their immediate environment. Adeline et al. (2017) found that youths are adventurous and heavy imitators of what they see on television; hence they are more vulnerable to televised violence. One of the constituents of entertainment television especially for children today is the cartoon. Cartoons offer children a wide range of viewing experience that does not only apply to the mind-set, but also their psychological upbringing. The fantasies that these cartoons offer could help develop the orientation of a child or totally destroy it.

Cartoons which were first made in the late 1800s are short movies made by using animations instead of using live actors especially a humorous film intended for children (Thompson, 2010). Cartoons can also be described as the making of movies by filming a sequence of slightly varying drawings or models so that they appear to move and change when the sequence is shown. These are the elements that keep viewers (mostly children) glued to their seats.

In their early stages, cartoons were so short because people would be watching these shots in the movie theatres before the feature film. When cartoonists had to put their shows on TV, they began to get longer, creating the half hour block shows that are now on Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and the Disney Channel and other channels today. Hence, cartoons have become more "family friendly" now so that more people would watch the shows (Kapelian, 2009).

Cartoons affect the social and moral development of children in their journeys towards becoming full-fledged members of their societies, in other words in their socialization process. Cartoons determine the level to which violence and aggression is induced. After watching cartoons for a long period of time during their early stage of life, children mistake some characters as role models (Kochanska, 1993).

Tom and Jerry, two of the most watched cartoon characters in motion pictures, were created by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Their plot centered on a never-ending battle, in other words, a chase between a housecat and a brown mouse. In the pilot episode, the main protagonist, Tom, was a blue-grey longhair cat while Jerry, the second protagonist, was a small and brown house mouse. The physical appearances of both Tom and Jerry evolved over the years. The series developed into a quicker, more energetic tone. Though the original theme of the series - cat chases mouse- remained the same. Hanna and Barbera came up with numerous variations on this theme.

Statement of the Problem

Children learn faster than adults, and their re-enactment of media messages is unrivalled. Since most children's programmes are presented in entertainment form especially in the form of cartoons, it is important to measure the amount of influence these cartoons have on children. While there have been series of studies that generally measure the impact of televised violent programmes on children's behaviour, there has not been any current studies that particularly target the cartoon series, "Tom and Jerry".

Consequently, the central problem investigated in this study is the influence of violent contents of the cartoon, "Tom and Jerry" on children's behaviour. As a basis for this research, the researcher identified the problem to be two folds: Firstly, the absence of current empirical studies on the impact of Tom and Jerry cartoons on the behaviour of Nigerian children. Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley (2008) posit that the amount of things shown on television as cartoons, home video, and other media contents have a way of influencing the behaviour of children. Secondly, there are no current studies that particularly target the benefits Nigerian children derive from watching "Tom and Jerry". American Paediatrics Association recognized that entertainment television has become a major teaching agent and, therefore, plays a widely unrecognized but potent influence on the development of children (Muss, 1999).

Research Questions

Arising from the statement of the problem, the following research questions were drafted for investigation.

1. What is the influence of "Tom and Jerry" cartoons on the behaviour of Nigerian children?
2. What benefits do children in Nigeria derive from watching "Tom and Jerry"?

Literature Review

The current study reviews literature relevant to it such as the concept of a child, concept of child behaviour, cartoons and children's violent behaviour, and Tom and Jerry cartoon phenomenon.

Concept of Child

A legal, biological, and social definition at the United Nations convention on the rights of the child defines a child as "a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". The legal definition of *child* generally refers to a minor, otherwise known as a person younger than the age of majority. Biologically, a child is anyone between birth and puberty or in the developmental stage of childhood, between infancy and adulthood. Gentile, Saleem, and Anderson (2007) stated that a child (plural: children) is a human between the stages of birth and puberty.

A child generally has fewer rights than an adult and is classed as unable to make serious decisions, and legally must always be under the care of a responsible adult. Recognition of childhood as a state different from adulthood began to emerge in the 16th and 17th centuries. Society began to relate to the child not as a miniature adult but as a person

of a lower level of maturity needing adult protection, love and nurturing. Social attitudes toward children differ around the world in various cultures. These attitudes have changed over time. A 1988 study on European attitudes toward the centrality of children found that Italy was more child-centric and the Netherlands less child-centric, with other countries, such as Austria, Great Britain, Ireland and West Germany falling in between.

The age at which children are considered responsible for their society-bound actions (e.g. Marriage, voting, etc.) has also changed over time, and this is reflected in the way they are treated in courts of law. According to Odenigbo and Adejefor (1997), in the 19th century, children younger than seven years old in Nigeria were believed incapable of crime while children from the age of seven upwards were considered responsible for their actions. Therefore, they could face criminal charges, be sent to adult prison, and be punished like adults by whipping, branding or hanging. Today in many countries like Canada and the United States, children at twelve and older are held responsible for their actions and may be sent to special correctional institutions, such as juvenile hall. Minimum employment age and marriage age also vary. In at least 125 countries, children aged 7–15 may be taken to court and risk imprisonment for criminal acts. In some countries, children are legally obliged to go to school until they are 14 or 15 years old, but may also work before that age.

Concept of child behaviour

Modern psychological research shows that a child's cognitive development and patterns of behaviour begin to form very early in life. The acclaimed Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, showed that soon after birth, a baby begins to learn through observation, adopting mental concepts from the environment. The incoming sensory data that the child receives, even as a toddler, has a major effect on his development. Later on, the child only continues developing and perfecting what he had absorbed from his surroundings during the early years.

Consequently, it is important to note that the rational part of the child's brain is not yet fully developed andis, therefore, driven by his/her emotions. These emotions can make a child do what appears right to them. Although human behaviour is complex and varies greatly among individuals, certain behavioural patterns can be identified by following the basic behavioural principle called the Law of Effect (wwww.edb.gov.hk.com). Simply put, when our behaviour (whether desirable or undesirable) is followed by a positive and encouraging response (such as praise or reward), the chance of us repeating this behaviour will increase. However, if our behaviour is followed by a negative response (such as criticism or reproach), or even no response, the chance of us repeating this behaviour in the future will be reduced. These responses are called motivations. The motivation behind a child's behaviour is relatively simple. It is mainly:

i. To get things she/he likes, e.g. praise, attention, material reward and interesting activities; or
ii. To avoid things she/he dislikes, e.g. reproach, neglect, punishment and activities a child hates (wwww.edb.gov.hk.com).

Momjunction.com lists some children's behaviour as follows:

i. It is common for children to lie and still feel nothing is wrong with it.
ii. They can disrespect and talk back at the parent especially when they are less than three years old.
iii. Children easily get angry and violent most times, for self-defence.
iv. A child tends to bully others to feel powerful and resolve his social problems easily.
v. Children are good at acting out, lying, or crying to get what they want (www.momjunction.com).

According to the law of effect, if parents give in to some of these behaviours in a child, the child feels justified and motivated.

Cartoons and Children's Behaviour

"From the time children learnt to talk, they are mesmerized by the sounds and moving images of Sesame Street" (Baran & Davis, 2009, p.87).

Cartoons have been the favourite viewing choices of kids partly because cartoons are very entertaining and children do not like to be bored, so they have a good match in cartoons. Cartoons also provide opportunity for children to learn so many things, and in fact expand children's imagination. Besides, many cartoon contents are fantastic; this makes children get carried away by what they see though far from reality. Unfortunately however, many other cartoons are filled with violence and bad language and therefore have a negative impact on a child's developing mind; a child's mind is like a sponge it absorbs everything a child sees and hears.

It is difficult to find even one cartoon that does not use elements of violence, scorn and degradation. There will always be someone who suffers and someone who enjoys it. Systematically, cartoons' plots revolve around the pleasure derived from deriding and abusing one or more of the characters. Many cartoon programs have shown violence and aggression in a way that the perpetrators are attractive and heroic characters rather than as a villain. Also most of the bad act does not have consequences, no pain or suffering by the victims or survivors. To the children, that is how they perceive the world they are in. Garden (2008) notes that if they are constantly exposed to cartoons with violence and fighting, it will affect them morally and may lead to violence teenage in the future".

An American study found that many cartoons can be harmful to the mental health of children under the age of 7, as they have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy as seen on television (Federman 1998, p.10). Also, in a study conducted by the Kaiser family foundation in 2003, it was found out that nearly half (47 per cent) of parents with children between the ages of 4 and 6 report that their children have imitated aggressive behaviours from cartoons shown on TV (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003, p.8).

In her latest interview with Nogoum FM, Psychiatrist Seham Hassan claimed that games and cartoons such as "Tom & Jerry" can cause children to behave violently and grow up with a violent mentality. The experienced psychiatrist built her statement on a series of studies conducted on "Tom & Jerry". According to these studies, "Tom & Jerry"cartoons encourage kids to be violent because "Tom and Jerry constantly hit each other and no one dies".

The Tom and Jerry phenomenon

"Tom & Jerry"cartoon series was one of the most watched on TV hence it won seven Academy Awards (Barnes, 4). Not much research has been conducted on the causes of this phenomena success and popularity of the series even though it is impossible to deny this fact. The success and popularity of the "Tom & Jerry"series is not occasional. Watching the cartoon series, one can see that there are particular reasons why people from all over the world continue to watch this cartoon."Tom & Jerry"series are popular because of at least three reasons.

First, friendship between Tom and Jerry is one of the main reasons why children watch the series. "They've been bashing each other silly for six decades, beating one another with planks, poisoning poor Jerry, smoking cigars and even cutting a tree in half using Tom's crotch" but they still remained friends ("Animals and tobacco", 2006).When they appeared in danger, they always tried to save each other; they did all possible to reconsider the situations and find ways out which could be helpful and useful at that moment. Breckin Meyer, an actor, in his interview to Tom Gliatto said when he was a boy, he shared his feelings about this series like "Man, these guys are making me feel! I respect the hell out of them: Their friendship has outlasted everything" (Gliatto, 2011).

Secondly, the cartoon's popularity is based on Tom's attempts to play a trick on Jerry. Each try is failed, each dirty trick Tom creates and plans turns against him. It should be stated that being children, these tricks are seen and considered as something bad, but the fair outcome helps them consider good and bad actions. Hodgen, (2008) is sure that each child wants to prevent the cat from pain he accidentally causes to himself, "if only the cat would learn… If only he would take instruction". Such thoughts appear in the mind of every child.

Therefore, a child's attention is attracted by Tom's creative decisions and the ways and how every plan goes wrong because of Jerry's mind.

Thirdly and finally, another reason for Tom & Jerry series' popularity is the peculiarity of the ways the characters are able to find ways out of bad situations. Thus, during the whole series Tom and Jerry try to smite each other, to appear faster, craftier and smarter. However, having appeared in the complicated situations (usually in those they have developed for each other), they search for smart and funny ways out. The peculiarity of these outcomes is that today people sympathize with the cat, but another day they cannot watch how the cat envies the mouse and then feel sorry for him (Hodgen, 2008).

Empirical Review

This study reviewed two works similar to the current work in other to look at their findings and recommendations and also other areas not being tackled.

Oyero and Oyesom (2014) in their study: "Perceived Influence of Television Cartoons on Nigerian Children's Social Behavior" examined the influence of cartoons on Nigerian children's social behavior from the perspective of the parents and the children. Social learning theory was used as a theoretical framework. The study adopted the survey design methodology where data were collected from 100 pupils and 50 parents through questionnaire, interviews and focus group discussions. Simple percentages and Chi Square were used for data analysis. The findings showed that both children and parents share similar understanding on the influence of cartoons on children as being positive. While cartoons are said to help children's spoken English, learning inventions and good morals, as well as keep children busy among other benefits, some parents expressed that some influence of cartoons could be negative and therefore some regulations required in mitigating those negative aspects of cartoons. It is recommended that parents should make a conscious effort to monitor the cartoons that their children watch to ensure that it is appropriate to their age.

Ezeukwu (2013) conducted a study titled "Influence of Televised Violence on Socio Emotional and Academic Adjustment of Students in Federal Tertiary Institutions in Anambra State." The study used the descriptive survey design methodology while adopting the Social Learning Theory as a framework. The population of the study consisted of 1150 students (both male and female) drawn from three federal tertiary institutions in Anambra State; Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Federal College of Education Umunze and Federal Polytechnic Oko.

The study found that ways of behaving are learned by observing others and that this is the major means by which children acquire unfamiliar behaviour, although performance of acquiring behaviour will depend at least in part in factors other than acquisition. The study also found that the consequences of observing others influence our willingness to perform the behaviour ourselves.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the social learning theory proposed by Albert Bandura since 1977. Social learning theory emphasizes the "reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural and environmental determinants" of human behaviour (Bandura, 1977: vii). It stresses the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others.

Bandura (1977, p.198) 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. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action…

Social learning occurs through four main stages of

imitation, namely: close contact, imitation of superiors, understanding of concepts, and role model behaviour. As explained by Baran and Davis (2003, p.196), the component processes underlying observational learning are attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation. Attention includes modelled events (distinctiveness, affective valence, complexity, prevalence, functional value) and observer characteristics (sensory capacities, arousal level, and perceptual set, past reinforcement). Retention involves symbolic coding, cognitive organization, symbolic rehearsal, motor rehearsal. Motor reproduction includes physical capabilities, self-observation of reproduction, and accuracy of feedback. Motivation involves external, vicarious and self-reinforcement.

From the discussion, it can be reliably argued that this theory is relevant to the current study since it appropriately addresses how television cartoons help in shaping the social behaviour of children. This is because these children are repeatedly exposed to these cartoons that affect their social behaviour. They engage in a form of social learning process through some of the attributes as portrayed by cartoon characters on television channels.

Methodology

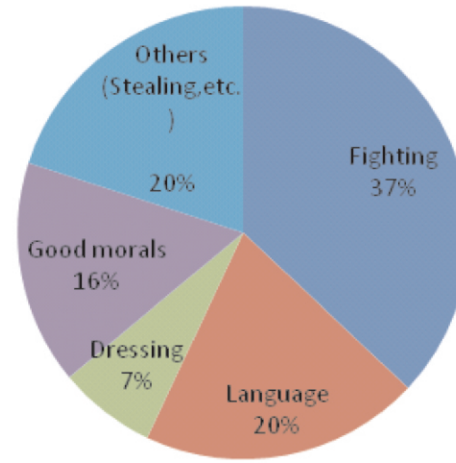
The survey research method is used in the conduct of this study. Survey method of research does not only allow for the generalizations about a study population's characteristics but its behaviour as well. The survey research method focuses on a representative sample that is derived from the entire population of study (Nwodu, 2017).This study targeted the children and parent population of Jos metropolis, consisting of Jos North and Jos South LGAs of Plateau State Nigeria. The sample size of the study is 350, determined through purposive sampling using Taro Yamane's sample size formula: $n=N/1+N(e)^2$

Three hundred and fifty (350) copies of questionnaire were distributed. However three hundred (300) copies were retrieved. Consequently, data collected based on three hundred (300) completed copies of questionnaire were certified valid and presented. The data collected is further analysed to answer the research questions using simple percentage and the result presented in pie charts for easy understanding.

Research Question One:

What is the influence of Tom and Jerry cartoons on the behaviour of Nigerian children?

The answer to this research question is presented in the Pie Chart 1 below



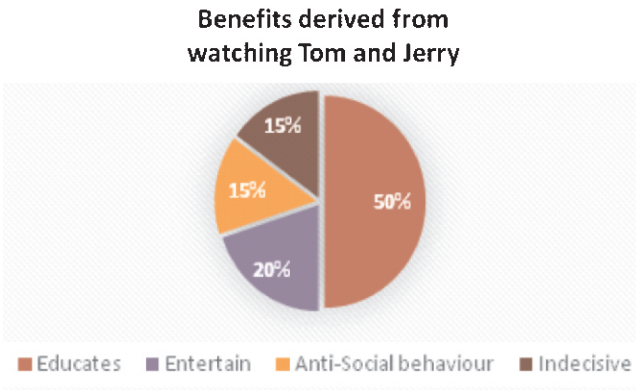
Source: Field Study 2020

Giving answers to the above question, 110 (n- 110) respondents representing 37% believe that cartoons influence fighting in children, 60 (n- 60) respondents representing the 20% believe cartoons influence language in children, while 20 (n-20) respondents representing 7% believe cartoons influence dressing in children. 50 (n-50) respondents representing 16% believe cartoons influence good morals in children, while 60 (n-60) respondents representing 20% believe that cartoon influence other behaviours like (stealing, bullying, lying, disrespect, etc.) in children. The above implies that cartoons influence fighting in children more than any other attitude. Hence, a majority of the respondents believe that watching Tom and Jerry exposes children to negative behaviours.

Research Question Two:

What benefits do Nigerian children derive from watching "Tom and Jerry" cartoons?

The answer to this research question is presented in the Pie Chart 2 below:



Source: Field Study 2020

From the above, 50% of the respondents stated that "Tom and Jerry" educates children that watch it; as a result they derive more knowledge. 20% stated that children derive fun and entertainment from watching "Tom and Jerry", while 15% stated that "Tom and Jerry" exposes children to an anti-social behaviour such as lying, fighting, and bullying, and 15% were indecisive regarding the benefits derivable from watching "Tom and Jerry" cartoons.

Discussion of Findings

In answer to the research questions,57% of the respondents (250 respondents) think that children react to contents of "Tom and Jerry" negatively as the contents induce negative behaviours such as fighting and stealing in them. Wilson (2008) offers that children engage in emotional sharing with well-liked characters that in turn may account for the valuing or enjoyment of television violence, or at the least, toleration. According to Potter (2008) people identify with characters who have similarities to them but who also have qualities that they would like to possess. From a social learning-cognitive theoretical perspective, children may focus on television characters that are like 'them to guide their behaviour or help them form scripts of acceptable behaviours and possible outcomes' (Signorelli, 2006).

Also, 50% of the respondents stated that "Tom and Jerry" educates children that watch it. Children who watch educational programmes like cartoons are more likely to have higher grades, read more books, place greater value on achievement, and show more creativity than children who watch more violent or purely 'entertainment' television (Diehl & Toelle, 2011, p.3).

Conclusions/Recommendations

This study found that there is a strong impact of cartoon programmes on school going kids which is often reflected in their lifestyles, dressing, aggressive and violent behaviour and their language. Also, cartoons provide opportunity for children to learn so many things, and it can expand children's imagination. Consequently, this study concludes that:

1. "Tom and Jerry" cartoons influence the social behaviour of children who watch it.
2. Children who watch "Tom and Jerry"cartoons derive benefits from watching it.

This study recommends therefore that:

1. Since "Tom and Jerry" cartoons influence the social behaviour of children, cartoon producers and stakeholders in children programme production should help to provide the right content in cartoons in order to combat the negative influences that the cartoons might have on their viewers especially children who are generally vulnerable.
2. Since children who watch "Tom and Jerry" cartoons derive benefits from watching it, cartoon producers should emulate "Tom and Jerry" cartoons. Government as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), etc. should also play a vital role in the sponsorship and promotion of young and upcoming animators so as to encourage them to develop indigenous cartoons to incorporate the aspect of these cartoons that benefit children more so as to improve children development through entertainment programmes like cartoons.

There should also be some enlightenment programmes to educate parents and guardians on the need to monitor what kind of cartoon

programmes the children watch in order to ensure their appropriateness.

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