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Imported cartoon films: Replacing African social-cultural values?

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Abstract

This study, Imported Cartoon Films: Replacing African Social-Cultural Values, examined the impact of animation movies on the Nigerian child in the areas relating to association and cultural values and affiliation. To ascertain the impact, the study seeks parents' and caregivers' opinions. The sociological research method is used. A random oral interview was conducted with parents and caregivers of children between the ages of 0–14. A good number of the research population and sample size have representatives from the low, middle, and upper-class citizens residing in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria. While most of the respondents have a television set, a phone that can access cartoon films from the internet, others have access to cable television in their homes. The study finds that children spend more time with cartoon films than with peers at school and in the neighborhood. Also, most of the cartoon films Nigeria children are exposed to; do not reflect the culture of host communities because they are foreign. The study recommends that parents should monitor children's attachment to cartoon films and encourage more peer association. Children should be exposed more to cartoons that reflect the culture and values of the host community for cultural posterity and preservation.

Keywords

association, cartoon or animated film, communication, culture, development, media, moral values

Introduction

Moral values and socialisation are part of a peoples' culture which are learned from childhood. Also, the total life experiences of a people include their social-cultural life and behaviour. The language, dress, grooming, food, art, relationship, as well, forms part of the peoples' social life. Traditionally for the African child, coming together in the evenings to sing, dance, and tell stories, was the primary means of

socialising. The dances, songs, and stories teach morals, preservation, and propagation of the African culture. However, today, the television and film medium has become the chief agents of association and presentation of culture to the African child. One thing to note is that the films presentations, most times, are the life experiences of the culture that produces them, and they can have a tremendous effect on viewers of the consuming culture, therefore, replacing the life experiences and social-cultural values of the host culture

Going further, animation films are an inevitable part of every child's life. "Since the emergence of cartoon films over a century ago, several generations of children have grown up, watching and learning from them."¹ This media genre, popularly known as cartoons by the African child, shown in local and international television, film, and on the internet, has the capacity of influencing the child's social, moral, and cultural development, as well as his cultural affiliation. Development is fostered by interaction. Berman explains that whatever a child comes in contact with, in his developmental stage affects his maturity, the way he actively constructs meanings from his or her experiences, and his entire developmental process.² It also implies that the cartoon film is one of the forces that could influence the child's conceptions of the world. If Berman is correct, then, cartoon films are capable of creating, re-creating, or forming a child's social, moral, and cultural conception and perception about reality.

Further, the importance of the medium on children's overall development, is enormous, with a combination of text, audio, graphics, and animation, computer technology enriches education in a way that traditional teaching media such as books, video, role-plays, and so forth might look irrelevant and tedious.³ Wartella takes a step further on the benefit of group viewership. He mentioned that, as children are now increasingly using media at schools, with family or friends, are a sign of social interaction; and that playing games and watching cartoon films together with peers, besides bringing them together, is the most common way of learning among user's, ages 2 to 18 years old.⁴ This, therefore, means that group computer usage and viewing animation films together among children of the same age grade, not only teaches them but improves their social interaction. Besides educational and social benefits, children's television programs and cartoon films,

¹ N. Anisha, *Positive and Negative Effects of Cartoons on Child Behaviour and Development*, <https://parenting.firstcry.com/articles/positive-and-negative-effects-of-cartoons-on-child-behaviour-and-development/> [accessed: 26.10.2021].

² S. Berman, *Children's Social Consciousness and the Development of Social responsibility*, New York 1997.

³ Z. Okan, *Edutainment: Is learning at Risk?* "British Journal of Educational Technology" 2003, 34(3), p. 255–264.

⁴ E. Wartella, B. Keefe, & R. Scantlin, *Children and Interactive Media: A Compendium of Current Research and Directions for the Future*, Menlo Park, CA 2000.

portraying family members managing their relationships and conflict effectively through weekly family series can also serve as models for children.⁵ By extension, watching cartoons is a great way to teach children about local customs, language, traditions, history, and mythology.

From another dimension, because the scriptwriting process and story development of many cartoon films are continuous, the costumes are designed to support the narrative throughout the film production. It should be noted that costume in animated films is employed not only to augment the different changes in the plot, to strengthen some of the scenes, or to visually support the character and the narrative. Costume in children's films is used to tell the history and traditions of the producing culture. Even though the costumes in foreign animated films are innovative, they are not a replicate of real African life and culture. Therefore, they are culturally defective and irrelevant to the consuming culture. These, give wrong messages to children and affect their cultural and social behaviour.

From the foregoing, the benefit of media usage and group viewership of animation films on education and social interaction for the modern African child is enormous. However, the question of cultural content and its effects on the children of host culture needs to be examined. Berman argued that it is not the medium itself that affects children's perceptions, attitudes, or awareness but the content with which they carry out activities with specific conditions and goals.⁶ To approve or disprove this claim, the study depended on oral interviews to achieve its aims. The interview focuses on parents and caregivers of children between the ages of 0–14, residing in Sapele, Delta State, Nigeria. A total of fifty-two (52) families, among are, teachers, traders, businesses men, and farmers are interviewed. The most relevant responses informed the conclusion of this study.

Theoretical Foundation

Many scholars believe that electronic media, especially television and film, are powerful media that can affect ones' perception of the social and cultural world. On the other hand, others believe that such media have very limited power of effect. Among those that agree for this assertion is Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams. Quoting these people, Adeseye says that "the introduction of any medium into any society alters the functioning of the proceeding media as well as institutions social relationships and people's way of perception of things they con-

⁵ W. Douglass, *The Fall From Grace: The Modern Family on Television*, "Communication Research" 1996, 23(6), p. 675-702.

⁶ S. Berman, *Children's Social Consciousness...*, *op. cit.*

sider important in that society.”⁷ Adeseye’s assertion is in agreement with Ibagere’s position that, “by providing images and stereotypes, television tends to legitimize the existing social structure and maintains the status quo. This, then, generates more attention to the medium, making it a most widely used in the society.”⁸ Both Ibagere and Adeseye’s assertions fall under the *Hypodermic Needle Theory* of media effect which is also known as the *Magic Bullet Theory*, rooted in 1930s behaviourism. Berga explains that; the Magic Bullet of hypodermic theory graphically assumes that the media’s message is a bullet fired from the media gun into the viewer’s head. It uses the same idea of the shooting paradigm. It suggests that the media inject their messages straight into the passive audience and that this passive audience is immediately affected by these messages.

Also, regular viewership can have an immense influence on individuals’ perceptions of their environment. Over time, such contents will become encoded into long-term memory and may be used when forming social and cultural reality beliefs.⁹ This idea is drawn from Gerbner’s cultivation theory of media effect (1976). The theory state that regular viewership of film poses an influence on viewers and shapes their conceptions of social reality, as well as their beliefs, behaviour, and mindset¹⁰. This means that the public can cultivate a set of beliefs through constant exposure to a media product. “Those media messages and or images form a common culture through which communities cultivate shared and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence.”¹¹ This is so because humans “knowledge is acquired not only from personal experiences but from a variety of stories seen and heard from television and films.¹² Eman, also mentioned that “TV (film) has become an essential source in providing individuals with information about the surrounding world, as it proffers to them basic facts about life, people, society, and authority. For, situations depicted in fiction, drama, and news whether in a realistic, fantastic, tragic, or comic way, offer the best context for the dissemination of values and morals acceptably and enjoyably.”¹³ However, this may

⁷ B. Adeseye, *Yoruba Ifa Lore as a Paradigm of Communicating Popular Culture in Nigeria*, PhD Thesis: University of Abuja 2012, p. 41.

⁸ E. Ibagere, *The Role of Television in Social and Political Development*, PhD thesis: University of Ibadan 1992, p. 96.

⁹ L. Wing Tung, *How do Media Shape perceptions of Social Reality? A Review of Cultivation theory*, “Journal of Communication and education” 2015, 2(2), p. 8, 14.

¹⁰ L. Wing Tung, *How do Media Shape perceptions...*, *op. cit.*

¹¹ J. Potter, *A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory*, “Journal of Communication” 2014, 64, p. 1015–1036.

¹² M. Eman, *All you Need to Know About Cultivation Theory*, “Global Journal of Human Social Science, Art and Humanities Psychology” 2005, 15(8).

¹³ M. Eman, *All you Need to Know About Cultivation Theory...*, *op. cit.*

to a large extent be dependent on Cohen's words that, "the more time people spend living in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social realities portrayed in television (film)."¹⁴ This implies that the media are not all-powerful but that time spent viewing its contents is a determining factor for cultivation, leading to being influenced. This also means that there are circumstances under which "specific types of media content have a specific effect on certain members of the audience."¹⁵

As mentioned before, social interaction, whether from a family member or cartoon films, plays a fundamental role in the child's social, cultural, and moral development. Vygotsky¹⁶ explains that every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; between people (inter psychological) and then inside the child (intra psychological). This applies equally to the formation of social-cultural concepts. For Vygotsky, although biological factors constitute the requirement for elementary processes to emerge, socio-cultural factors are fundamental for elementary natural processes to develop. He also argues for the uniqueness of the social environment and regards socio-cultural settings as the primary and determining factor in the development of higher forms of human mental activity such as voluntary attention, intentional memory, logical thought, planning, and problem-solving. According to Vygotsky, the child follows an adult's example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help.¹⁷ By implication, since the animated film is part of the child's social environment as noted earlier, children tend to follow the actions, language, and mode of dressing of the animated characters. These imitations no doubt contributes to the higher forms of human mental activity which affects the child's overall conception and perception of realities.

Of culture

Culture is everything that makes up a person's entire way of life. The customs and traditions that a particular group of people respects is their culture. These include their ceremonies, language, religion, and the expression of basic beliefs like art, literature, dress, and grooming music and dance. Culture comprises the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, intellectual, and emotional features that

¹⁴ J. Cohen, & G. Weimann, *Cultivation Revisited: Some Genres have some Effects on some Viewers*, "Communication Reports" 2000, 13(2), p. 99-114.

¹⁵ B. Adeseye, *Yoruba Ifa Lore...*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes: Interaction Between Learning and Development*, Cambridge, MA 1978, p. 57.

¹⁷ L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society...*, *op. cit.*

characterizes society, our thought about life, and our ideas. Ademola & Okunola¹⁸ explains that “culture shapes the way we see the world; it can bring about the change of attitudes needed to ensure peace and sustainable development which we know, forms the only possible way forward for life on planet earth. Further, culture may be material or non-material. This means that the concept of culture includes ideas, values, customs, and artefacts of a group of people. It is, in its entirety, what is cultured, behaviour, Knowledge, customs, craft or artefacts, etc. Ademola¹⁹ further affirms the above idea that the entire community life of a set of people is rooted in their culture. This can mean that both the community and its culture are inseparable. The community regulates and preserves its cultural activities. On the other hand, the culture identifies the community. Therefore, the traditions, customs, practices, bits of legend, and folklore presented in animation films can go a long way in making the children of the receiving community acculturate the spirit and way of life of the producing culture whose circumstances and way of life are quite different.

Of values

For Mukerjee Radhakamel,²⁰ an Indian sociologist who initiated the study of social values, values are socially approved desires and goals that are internalised through the process of conditioning, learning, or socialisation and that become subjective preferences, standards, and aspirations. This means that the commonly held standard of what is acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant, right or wrong, workable or unworkable in a community or society is said to be cultural values. Richard²¹ also notes that “norms, along language, sanctions, and values are an element of culture.” further, the collective conceptions of what is considered good, desirable, proper or bad, undesirable, and improper in a culture, is a cultural value. These values indicate what people in a given society prefer as well as what they find important and morally right (or wrong). Values may be specific such as honouring one’s parent and owning a home or they may be more general such as health, love, and democracy. Values influence people’s behaviour and serve as criteria for evaluating the actions of others.

¹⁸ E. Ademola, & R. Okunola, *Peoples, Culture and Mass Media as Agent of Cultural Imperialism*, “In Covenant University Journal of Politics and International Affairs. CUJPIA” 2013, 1(2), p. 179–191.

¹⁹ E. Ademola, & R. Okunola, *Peoples, Culture and Mass Media...*, *op. cit.*

²⁰ R. Mukerjee, *Social Structure of Values*, London 1949, p. 54.

²¹ T. Richard, *Sociology*, 9th ed, New York 2005, p. 62–67.

Chiedozie Nzeh,²² believes that the process of grooming children to be well integrated into the culture of the society in which they find themselves is a function of communication. Besides the informal education that parents and caregivers give from home, the child learns values from information passed down through the use of the mass media. Because animated films are a medium of communication, the child gets to learn about social, cultural, values, and ethical norms through constant viewership. This kind of development according to Nor Azan Mat and Munirah Ghazali cited in Berman,²³ includes, social responsibility involving the development of social skills, ethics, characters, way of living with others, and responsibility for furthering a common goal.

Imported cartoon films: replacing African social-cultural values?

Out of the fifty-two families (52) interviews conducted, forty-three (43) do not take into account the genre of the cartoon films their children see. They are only interested in the entertainment value and the socialising effect on them. Mr. Friday, a father of four children between the ages of 2–17 years mentioned that when the GoTV decoder in his home is not subscribed, his children spend 3–4 hours together with his neighbour's children in the evenings watching cartoon films. Mrs. Isaac, a teacher and a mother 2 between the ages of 4 and 7 years says:

Mrs. Isaac: At times where there is no electricity and I want to read and prepare my lesson note, what I do is that I give my phone to my children to watch cartoon films so that they will not distract me. My husband has already downloaded several cartoon films on the phone. Watching cartoon films together brings my two kids closer. Even after fighting, when the time comes to watch a cartoon film, they become best of friends.

The implication of Mr. Friday and Mrs. Isaac's statement is that, besides the entertainment and socialising values that animation films offer, group viewership no doubt, propagates and encourages unity and peace among peers.

Four families mentioned that their children watch more religious cartoons than the other genres. Mr. Omamega, one of the respondents who is a Christian religious leader and a father of three, cited two cartoon films while responding to the interview. He says that

²² N. Chiedozie, *Functions of communication*, [in:] A. Kwagkondo, G. Olympus (ed.), *Introduction to Basic Communication*, Benue 2013, p. 150.

²³ S. Berman, *Children's Social Consciousness...*, *op. cit.*

Mr. Omamega: *Religious cartoons teach children good morals like forgiveness, and how to avoid stealing. They also teach them to trust in God. They are thought that God assists young ones in times of trouble. Just the way he assisted young David to kill Goliath in the film, **David and Goliath**, he also stands by faithful young one who desires to do his will. And give courage to young ones much the same way he did to the Israelite girl in the film, **Become Jehovah's Friend**.*

Patience, a nurse and a single mother of two also praises religious cartoons and refuted other cartoons for the poor moral lessons they teach. She said that

Patience: *With religious cartoons, my children have learned the need to pray regularly and they have become familiar with the creation story. Religious cartoons teach that magic is bad.*

She also mentioned other cartoon films whose theme she does not like for her children.

Patience: ***Barbie** for example is one cartoon film that presents magic as normal. **Superman** on the other hand teaches them that fighting violently for your right is one way of achieving one's goals in life. Same with the popular **Tom and Jerry**, **The Road Runner**, and **Oggy and the Cockroaches**.*

Besides the positive comment of Omamega and Patience on religious cartoons, the lack of awareness of the cartoon genre of twenty-eight (28) families shows that some parents in Nigeria are more interested in the entertainment value of the films rather than the effect they have on their overall development. However, the views of Omamega and Patience indicate that, if children are exposed to religious cartoons, they will behave more responsibly and spiritual.

However, Dr. Efiog, a father of two, whose wife is a trader, mentioned that he is particularly concerned about the language his children speak and the love they have for dresses worn by the cartoon characters. He said that his children speak only the English language both at home and at school. His concern is evident in his words.

Dr. Efiog: *The influence of the English language on my children is becoming too much, and it is of great concern to me. I am from Eket in Akwa Ibom state but I live here in Sapele. My wife's name is Urhobo. We do not speak any of our languages to the children at home. They are 7 and 9 years old now. When will they learn their mother tongue? Although I blame myself for failing to teach them my language, I want to beg the creators of cartoon films in Nigeria to create cartoons that speak the local language. At least, the children can learn the language from the films because I have observed that my children can speak the English language and sing the songs in the cartoon films fluently and perfectly. They also have a particular love for the style of dress worn by the cartoon character. I strongly believe that if the cartoons are speaking*

the Urhobo language, for example, the children will also find it easier to learn to speak the language. I think the cartoon film is the best means to teach the children the culture because they learn faster from them, even more than their teachers who teach them formally at school.

Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups and languages. Like Efiong's children, many other children in Nigeria whose parents hardly had time for them because of secular work and business, cannot speak their mother tongue. Therefore, the question of whom to blame becomes relevant. Mrs. Asemota responded as follows:

Mrs. Asemota: If our children do not know our culture, especially the language and our mode of dressing, we the parent should be blamed. They say charity begins at home. If for example, I speak my language to my daughter from when she was young, there is no way she would not understand the language. If she sees me put on my local traditional dress, she will over time learn to know that it is the acceptable way of dressing. But instead of parent training our children in this regard, we seem to overlook these areas, allow the media to teach them. Before we realise, they have grown. One thing we parent forget is that one's a child have passed the age of ten years, it becomes difficult to teach them the lost cultural heritage especially the language. And because they spend more time with the cartoon from a very early age, they will no doubt learn to love what they have been used to.

Contrary to Efiong, Mr. Evume, said that he has seen religious cartoons that speak Yoruba, Isoko, Ibo, and the Urhobo languages. And that all these sets of religious cartoons were produced by the Jehovah's Witnesses organisation 'to assist kids to understand fully some bible accounts. He mentioned that these cartoons series are in the *Become Jehovah's Friend* series and are available for download on www.jw.org. Mr. Okotie who has also seen such cartoons commended the effort made by Jehovah's witnesses. In his words,

Okotie: Doing a voice-over in the language of the receiving culture even though the characters are not blacks makes kids who understand their languages better comprehend the theme of the films. The Jehovah's Witnesses' idea must be commended.

Okotie is concerned about the spiritual benefit and the moral lessons children received from the religious cartoon films and not as a means of learning the language like Dr. Efiong suggested above.

Further talking on the language used in producing the foreign cartoon films and the effect on children of consuming culture, Engineer Mathew narrated his personal experience:

Engineer Mathew: Sometimes, when I watch the foreign cartoons, even as an adult, I don't clearly understand what they are saying because I was not brought up with the assent they are using. Even though some of the films have subtitles, I find it difficult to follow the written

words and the action at the same time. That is why I sometimes prefer to watch African magic because I don't have to be straining my ears to get what they are saying. The same thing applies to the kids. I feel that most kids follow the action and especially the songs rather than what is being said. It would have been better if some of the available foreign cartoons were voiced by people who have African ascent.

What Matthew implies is that the language of the foreign cartoon films is almost insignificant to children of the receiving culture. What parents should be concerned about is the presentation and action. Sadly, for the Nigerian community, few kids have seen a full-length cartoon film that has an African root with character and language. Because it is only natural that children are quick to copy and learn from whatever they are exposed to especially on the television, the tendency to acculturate becomes non-negotiable. What kids see in cartoon films affects the way they see the world. If they continue to imitate the cartoons in words and action they would with time adopt the foreign cultures and lose their own.

Further, this study finds that there is a significant relationship between viewing foreign animated films and social-cultural affiliation among Nigeria children. Children are under the guidance of parents and caregivers. This means that a lot of work on the control of the effects of animated films on children hangs on them. As Olusola and Oyero²⁴ put it, “the amount of parental involvement in supervising media exposure on children, significantly affects the influence the media have on them.” This means that parental guidance is needed. Also, while group viewership helps in the child’s social development, children are more positively influenced by the foreign values they see in the films. Conversely, Ogbotor, a father of 5 children between the ages of 6 and 18 said:

Ogbotor: It is not the songs, dress, language violence, immorality nor the vices in the films that matter, what matters is the overall moral lessons learned from the film. Even if the films use a foreign language, or there is violence in the cartoon film, most times, the good always wins.

However, Okoduwa, a primary school teacher says that,

Okoduwa: Young ones, in the process of development are vulnerable to change; therefore, their experiences and whatever they feel attached to at this period should be of particular interest to parents, caregivers, the government, and other agencies.

Further, children ages 0–14, are in a critical period of development. This is because they acquire major life skills like, the ability to walk, talk, read, and care

²⁴ S. Olusola, & O. Kehinde, *Perceived Influence of Television Cartoons on Nigerian Children's Social Behaviour*, “Estudosem Comunicação” 2014, 17, p. 116.

for themselves. It is also at this time that they come to know the world around them. During this time, the child first encounters his physical environment, family, peers, schools, and the media.

The study postulates that it is not only the physical environment where the child is born and raised that affects his social, and cultural domains, but the cartoon films. So, emphasis is put not only on the context in which children grow and develop in the macro environments of the society and the culture around them but especially in the micro-environment of their home as well, in which the cartoon film is part. It is observed also that what the films teach are foreign philosophies. Such philosophy, rather than help children to identify with, and sustain their indigenous values, educate them with alien cultural motifs. The language used in producing and voicing the films, the dresses the characters put on and the general moral values in those films are strange to the host community.

Because Nigeria lacks locally produced feature animation films, the result is that most of the cartoon Nigerian children feed on are western. The little or no availability of the feature cartoon films in the country is because “the government and other relevant organisations have refused to invest in this media genre. Rather than do so they have decided to invest in politics because of immediate gain.”²⁵ With these varied opinions presented, it is apt to state that since we live in an era where both parents are often working and children have more unsupervised time. It is essential that you (parent/caregiver) make time for children and regularly inform yourself of their day-to-day experiences.

Conclusion

Animation films as a genre of the mass media is a means of transmitting culture which could influence a child’s development. Also, children’s overall development is influenced by cartoon films because children spend much of their time watching and socializing with them. It is also good to mention here that since most of the cartoon films that Nigerian children are exposed to are foreign, modern Nigeria is grooming children with foreign cultural values. To further this thought, Heath and Gilbert²⁶ state that no one can deny the impudence that television and electronic media have had on children in contemporary society. In fact, television no longer reflects culture, but rather, it is the central cultural arm of society. It is an agency that acculturates the viewer to its point of view.

²⁵ B. Adeseye, *Yoruba Ifa Lore...*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ L. Heath, *Mass Media and Fear of Crime*, “American Behavioural Scientist” 1996, 39(4), p. 379–386.

Most of the cartoon films Nigeria children are exposed to, do no longer reflect the culture of the host communities. The reason is because of unchecked exposure to foreign television programmes. Less developed nations are losing their cultural identities to the rampaging influence of the developed ones. There is, therefore, a need for the media producers of host communities to step up and present what is friendly, culturally, ranging from the themes of what is presented to the language used. The gatekeepers of the Nigerian media industry have not been making programmes' content relevant to the cultural needs of her people. Now more than ever is the time to do so. Programmers have over the years been content with repackaging imported ideas and materials for domestic consumption. However, imported animated cartoons are creating a global culture by helping to eradicate cultural and social differences within individuals and nations. Therefore, "a very serious cultural identity problem is being created."²⁷ In any society where the mass media teaches what is foreign, the people with time will also become foreign, especially concerning their culture. Therefore, foreign animated films instead of helping local children to come close to their indigenous culture, feed them with foreign ideas resulting in cultural alienation.

Recommendation

1. Nigerian content developers should step up and create a product that will transmit positive cultural messages and engender specific socio-cultural attitudes and acceptable values in children.
2. The Nigerian government and private investors, who have the financial capacity, should encourage and financially empower young and upcoming animators in Nigeria who currently are producing short comic 2d and 3d cartoons to develop full-length indigenous cartoon films.
3. Parents and caregivers should be more sensitive and selective of the available foreign product for fear of replacing African social-cultural values in the mind of the children.

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²⁷ B. Adeseye, *Yoruba Ifa Lore...*, *op. cit.*

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