

# Foreign Television Cartoon Programs and Children's Social Behavior in Kenya

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**Abstract-** The research study sought to establish the influence of foreign television cartoon programs on children's social behavior in Kenya. It sought to achieve this by; 1) Investigating the influence of foreign cartoon programs content on children social behavior in Kenya, 2) Determining the influence of foreign television cartoon characters on children social behavior in Kenya, and 3) Analyzing the influence of foreign television cartoon viewership patterns on children social behavior in Kenya. The study found out that Kenyan children are spending a lot of time viewing foreign television cartoons programs with minimal/no parental guidance and that based on their gender, they identified with their favorite cartoon characters.

**Index Terms-** Television, Cartoon Programs, Children, Social Behavior

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Television has through the years proven to be an important socialization agent in children's lives; (Prot, et al., 2015) affirm this and acknowledge that socialization is no longer reserved to the influences of family, peers and other people in children's immediate environment. According to (Gonzalez-Mena, 2009) television is the one medium with greatest socialization effects exceeding all other media in its influence on young children. Time spent by children watching television has been directly linked with anti-social behaviors such as bullying and improper verbal utterances (Brodeur, 2007). The amount of time children are spending glued to television screens continues to gradually increase especially in the developing countries including Kenya with the shift from analogue broadcasting to digital broadcasting thus it's important to consider the likely effects that this could have on their social behavior. It would be safely assumed that being children content, television cartoons are the ideal option to keep children entertained with no need to supervise what they are watching. In Kenya for instance, cartoons as a safe entertainment option for children has been questioned following introduction of two interracial gay characters in Nickelodeon's Loud House cartoon series which triggered fears that it would negatively affect the morals of Kenyan children (Ondieki, 2016). This study therefore sought to determine the influence of television on Kenyan children's social behavior and the extent to which television has altered or augmented their social behavior. Though children can acquire both acceptable and unacceptable social behavior from various sources, it is important to find out the contribution of

television and more so of cartoon programs which are specifically designed for the children.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The social behavior of Kenyan children continues to mutate as opportunities to access a variety of children themed television programs increase in this digital age. With no set limit for television viewing in Kenya, the average time of watching television for a child based in Kenya is most likely to go up with switch from analogue to digital broadcasting which has seen the television content available considerably increase. Stifled with challenges of funds and infrastructure, Kenya has not been able to invest in children content production opting for already foreign produced children content. With longer periods of exposure to foreign cartoon programs, social behavior of Kenyan children could be influenced to some extent thus it is important to consider the likely effects this could have in modifying their social behavior either positively or negatively.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

The study was guided by three specific objectives:

- i. To investigate the influence of foreign television cartoon programs content on children social behavior in Kenya
- ii. To determine the influence of foreign television cartoon characters on children social behavior in Kenya
- iii. To analyze the influence of foreign television cartoon viewership patterns on children social behavior in Kenya

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (LITERATURE REVIEW)

### 2.1 Foreign Television Cartoon Programs Content

The kind of content children are exposed to when viewing television cartoons is an essential consideration in how it influences their social behavior. According to (Kirkorian, Wartella, & Anderson, 2008), the content children watch on television is at least important as, and probably more important than, how much they watch. (Wilson, 2008) also concludes that media influence on children is dependent more on the type of content they are exposed to than on the time they spend in front of the screen. The contribution of foreign television

cartoon content in influencing social behavior of Kenyan children therefore, ought to be considered. Though prominence is put on the anti-social aspects of children television cartoon programs content and their negative impact on children's social behavior, it's equally important to consider the pro-social aspects of children television cartoon programs content and their positive influence on children's social behavior. (Wilson, 2008) agrees to this view remarking that if television can impart antisocial behavior such as violence and aggression in children then it can as well teach them beneficial behavior such as altruism, friendliness, cooperation and sympathy. The language used in the children television cartoon programs is of interest; in the same way children imitate what they see on the television cartoon programs is the same way they pick up words they hear on the television cartoon programs and integrate them in their vocabulary. Research studies done over the years on language acquisition have demonstrated that children aged 2 and above years can readily learn vocabulary from television programs (Kirkorian, Wartella, & Anderson, 2008) (Kondo & Steemers, 2007).

## 2.2 Foreign Television Cartoon Characters

Children are likely to identify with heroic cartoon characters which could subsequently lead to imitation of the characters' behaviors. According to (Lamraoui, 2016), cartoon heroes have great influence on children who almost always try to play the role of those heroes in the actual world. Animated cartoon characters according to (Klein & Shiffman, 2006) help in forming children's initial notions of what it means to be pretty, handsome, ordinary-looking or unattractive. It is imperative therefore to understand how foreign television cartoon characters could impact on the social behavior of Kenyan children. According to (Gökçeşlan, 2010) television is one of the most effective factors in children's internalization of gender stereotypes. Gökçeşlan notes that many children television cartoon programs consolidate gender discrimination intensively with male cartoon characters dominating female cartoon characters. In the television cartoons, the white cartoon characters dominate colored cartoon characters. (Götz, et al., 2008) affirm this noting that the dominant color of the main characters in children cartoons is white. According to (Lacroix, 2009) media images of animated cartoon characters contribute to the centering of white experience as normal and natural. This limited representation of minority characters could suggest to children that whites are more important than minorities, with majority of African countries including Kenya, relying on foreign television cartoon programs for their children audiences where there are no African cartoon characters that they can identify with, children are likely to identify with foreign cartoon characters they deem ideal which could consequently influence their social behavior not only in the short term but long term. Foreign television cartoon characters are not only being utilized in entertaining children but also in marketing and advertising various products and services in the Kenyan market. Branded cartoon characters are increasingly being used to market various things to children including clothes, range of accessories, fast food and soft drinks. Brookside Dairy Limited, a Kenyan firm and Walt Disney Company have recently entered into a strategic partnership to provide new range of dairy fresh milk products featuring Disney, Disney-Pixar and Marvel cartoon themed characters such as Sofia the First, Spiderman among others branded on packs (BusinessToday, 2017)

## 2.3 Foreign Television Cartoon Viewership Patterns

According to (Common-Sense-Media, 2013) television viewing is the most popular form of media exposure for young children notwithstanding the increasing exposure to other multiple forms of screen technology. Though scanty information is available on the average children television viewership time in a majority of African countries, it is expected that with the digital migration that has recently been adopted in Africa, the time an African child spends watching television and especially the cartoon programs has considerably gone up. Children television viewers could be categorized in three major profiles as heavy television viewers, moderate television viewers and light television viewers. Few research studies in African countries such as Nigeria and South Africa reveal that compared to a decade ago, children are spending a considerable amount of time watching television (Oyero & Oyesomi, 2014) (Healthy Active Kids South Africa Report Card, 2014) which could spell out an emergence of heavy viewership tendencies. Mediated viewership by parents of children watching television cartoons could mitigate potential negative effects in their social interactions; mediation could be passive or active with parents either setting up rules pertaining television viewing or actively watching the television programs with their children. Parental or guardian intervention while children are watching television is not however popular with many children left to watch television unsupervised; studies done over time suggests that very few parents impose television viewing limits or get actively engaged in discussing television content with their children whatever their ages (Schmidt & Vandewater, 2008). Lack of mediated viewership, is not only a situation that characterizes parents in developed countries but also in the developing countries where parents are increasing working for longer hours as they strive to keep the households running effectively leaving the older siblings to take care of the younger children or leaving the children with a caretaker. (Kabiru & Njenga, 2007) note that parents in Kenya as in other developing countries are away from home most of the day in order to supplement family income. This is strong indication that parents and guardians don't monitor the amount and content of exposure to foreign television programs on their children. Further research by (Gitahi, 2011) affirms that majority of Kenyan parents don't watch television programs with their children and entrust them in the hands of caretakers and other older siblings.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This research study was based on literature review related to media effects especially television and its influence on children's behavior. Previously published journals, reports, unpublished theses among other publications were reviewed.

## 4. CONCLUSION

With the digital migration taking over in the developing countries, there is an influx of round the clock foreign television cartoon programs. 24 hour children programming is a phenomenon that until recently was not incorporated in the television programming of most developing countries including Kenya. Now, children can watch their favorite cartoons any time at the touch of the dial notwithstanding their parents are not always around to supervise what they are

watching. With the changing television viewing habits of the children, media effects are likely to take toll on their lives in the short term and even in the long term. Children are a vulnerable audience and the media effects on them are likely to have greater consequences than on adults. It is the high time that this is put in consideration and the relevant authorities step in to take measures before the situation gets out of hand.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Awareness campaigns on negative cartoon effects on children social behavior need to be held so that people and especially parents/guardians know that in as much there are positive effects that emanate from children watching cartoons they can have long term negative effects on their social behavior. There is a general lack of awareness that cartoon programs could actually influence children negatively.

The parents/guardians also need to supervise their children when watching cartoons. Through guided supervision, children can be advised on behaviors to shun as offensive language or violent acts. Parents/guardians may not always be there to supervise their children and in their absence they could leave an adult they can trust to guide their children as they watch cartoons. Alternatively they could use the parental controls to lock up cartoon programs that have content they deem inappropriate for their young ones.

More local children content especially cartoons need be produced from the developing countries other than on the current extensive reliance on foreign television cartoons which the children can't relate to. The African child needs Africa content produced for them.

Governments in the developing countries need to work in partnership with other relevant stakeholders such as the media institutions and the civil society organizations keen on children rights to develop comprehensive policies on children programming that are in tandem with international laws. This will encourage investors from within and without to support content production of children programs such as cartoons.

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