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**PERCEPTIONS ON TELEVISED ANIMATED CARTOONS  
WATCHED BY CHILDREN AGED SEVEN TO ELEVEN YEARS  
IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA**

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## PERCEPTIONS ON TELEVISED ANIMATED CARTOONS WATCHED BY CHILDREN AGED SEVEN TO ELEVEN YEARS IN NAIROBI COUNTY, KENYA

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to establish the perceptions on televised animated cartoons watched by children aged seven to eleven years in Nairobi County, Kenya.

**Methodology:** The study used descriptive survey method to collect information through casual interviews and self-administered questionnaires. The research used the non-probability design and employed judgmental sampling.

**Results:** The study also concluded that there are the reasons and views held by children in relation to how they rate their popular animated cartoons as “good” or “bad” from what they see and why. The respondents rated “Ben 10” as their most preferred animated cartoon program, with “Kim Possible” rated second, followed by “American Dragon” in third place and the Power puff girls coming in fourth. They are considered funny, enjoyable, entertaining, and interesting by the children. These characteristics all fall under the theme of entertainment and/or amusement. The respondents worst cartoon characters are “Johnny Bravo” followed by Ed, Edd and Eddy.

**Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy:** Parents need to advocate for high quality programmes for children and removal inappropriate animated cartoons from the local TV stations. Media corporations should not view children through an economic lens and they should be value-neutral. Furthermore, communications Commission of Kenya (CCK) and Kenya Film Censorship Board (KFCB), Ministry of Information and Communications should vet the content of animated cartoon before they are run on the TV stations and give advance clearance in an advisory capacity. There is no policies controlling the content in the animated aired on Kenyan TV stations.

**Keywords:** *Perceptions, Televised animated cartoons, Children aged seven to eleven years.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

The bulk of animated cartoon programs are being produced by Euro-American media companies, chief among them Walt Disney and Time Warner (Allela, 2013). Since they are produced in foreign cultures, it can be assumed that these animated cartoon programs do not entirely reflect to children in Nairobi the realities and sensibilities of the environment in which the children live. Instead, animated cartoons present Euro-American and Japanese perceptions and social constructions that are neither entirely relevant to nor desirable in Nairobi (Jäntti, 2015). Studies conducted in other parts of world show that perceptions transmitted via television profoundly influenced the ways children construct their world and form views. Given the level of influence, one cannot avoid seeing social dilemmas associated with the content of television programs and their animated cartoons (Allende-Hernández & Salinas, 2017).

Four stages in cognitive development have thus been identified that is, the sensory motor stage, the pre-operational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage (Seifert, 2013). The concrete operational (elementary and early adolescent) stage is where children begin to demonstrate intelligence through logical and systematic manipulation of symbols related to concrete objects. They develop operational thinking (mental actions that are reversible) and the egocentric thinking of the early childhood stage diminishes. This stage is crucial to the research on the impact of animated cartoons on children (Piaget, 2015).

At the concrete operational stage of child development where the 7 to 11 year age bracket children lie, a child is able to organize concepts into mental hierarchies, simultaneously attend to two or more objects or ideas, appreciate the principal of conversation and perform mental operations on objects (Seifert, 2013). It is at this stage that children understand and apply logical operations or principles that will help them to interpret specific experiences or perceptions. Children of this phase are less apt to view the world in egocentric, magical terms. They are less bound by what is immediately present. It is at this stage that children understand and apply logical operations or principles that will help them to interpret specific experiences or perceptions. She further notes that Children learn best when they are interested in what they are doing. If their interest is watching animated cartoons, then they will learn from the animated cartoons. Secondly children are active learners and not passive learners. Thus when they watch cartoons, they are watching as active participants and not passive participants (Zhang & Zhao, 2017).

Individuals will always tend to look to see if the other members follow societal norms, rules, and laws as an ability to distinguish right from wrong. Piaget (2015) looked at how children develop moral reasoning and found that younger children have a much more primitive understanding of right and wrong behavior than do older children. As children phase into adolescence they are particularly vulnerable to moments of melodrama, sentimentality, impulsiveness, and egocentric thinking and their ability to engage in moral thinking based on reality is still very much “under construction” (Modgil, Modgil & Brown, 2013).

While some of them erect a solid internal monitor – a pro-social conscience, others are still mainly responding to external messages about what is right and what is wrong. Whether they exhibit a conscience or not, their ability to understand the consequences of their behavior is still often quite limited and adult guidance is very necessary. This adult authority is important and its breakdown will lead to a greater reliance on peer influences and the effects of the mass media culture (Garrett, Doherty & Hann, 2018).

Moral development becomes the process through which these children learn the rules of conduct in their society and learn to act upon these rules. Children also need to develop empathy – the ability to feel what others are feeling. It helps them to connect abstract principles of morality with real life situations and feelings. Lack of empathy will result in a child's uninformed perspective of what is right or wrong to become a self-justifying rationale for behavior. In consuming media text, there are moral decisions to make based on the content. This influences the perspective from which moral decisions are made (Walrath, 2011) and how children would justify their actions if they were put in similar moral situations (Simon & Nail, 2013). It is, therefore, crucial to look at the moral development theory in relation to children and to the content of the material that they consume on television.

Within animated cartoons there are perceptions and attitudes that leave an impression on children particularly in the realms of sexuality, gender roles and image models. This is because these children are in that stage of development where images and impressions from diverse environments play a big part in how they construct their worldview (Vikiru, 2013). These cartoon programs are selling to children in Kenya perceptions and influences characterized by: the way they perceive the values they are buying into; the way they behave; how they speak; their body language and gestures; their self-image; the way they view gender; their social life, and the way they dress.

Pursuant to this understanding, the present research aims to find out how these constructions are created and reflected by conducting a survey of animated cartoon programs popular with children in Nairobi, why they are popular and the values, worldviews and perceptions contained within them. Therefore, the study sought:

- i. To establish the top choice cartoon among the children aged seven to eleven years in Nairobi County, Kenya.
- ii. To establish the worst cartoon characters among the children aged seven to eleven years in Nairobi County, Kenya.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Betty Boop is an animated cartoon character appearing in the *Talkartoon* and *Betty Boop* series of films produced by Max Fleischer and released by Paramount Pictures. As the first cartoon character with overt sexual appeal, Betty was a hit with theatregoers and despite having been toned down in the mid-1930s, she remains popular today. She made her first appearance on August 9, 1930 (Illustration 1) in the cartoon *Dizzy Dishes*, the sixth instalment in Fleischer's *Talkartoon*

series. She may be 78 years old but she is still one beautiful cartoon. Starting off as a canine cartoon with feminine attributes she evolved into the beautiful Betty many know and adore. Betty became finalized as completely human by 1932 in the cartoon *Any Rags*. Her floppy poodle ears became hoop earrings, and her black poodle nose became a girl's button-like nose. Betty appeared in ten cartoons as a supporting character, a flapper girl with more heart than brains Shigehatake, Yokota, Amano, Tomii, Inoue, Hagihara. ... & Minematsu, 2014).

In individual cartoons she was called "Nancy Lee" and "Nan McGrew", usually serving as girlfriend to studio star Bimbo. The character was modelled after a combination of Helen Kane, the famous popular singer of the 1920s and Clara Bow, a popular actress of the 1920s who did not manage to survive the transition to sound because of her strong Brooklyn accent, which nevertheless became a trademark for Betty. By direction of Dave Fleischer, Natwick designed the original character in the mode of an anthropomorphic French poodle- treating an animal as if they had human qualities. Betty Boop became the star of the Talkartoons by 1932, and was given her own series in that same year beginning with *Stopping the Show*. From this point on, she was crowned "The Queen of the Animated Screen." The series was hugely popular throughout the 1930s, lasting from 1930 onward (Illustration 2) (Habib & Soliman, 2015)



1a



1b

Illustration 2.2a) *Bugs Bunny* and 2.2 b) *Tom and Jerry*



2a 1930



2b 1933



2c 1981



2d 1981

Illustration 2a, 2.8b, 2.8c, and 2.8d: *Betty Boop Being Sexed-Up*

Jessica Rabbit is the animated femme fatale of the film “Who Framed Roger Rabbit” and is rated as one of the top sex symbols of cartoons throughout history according to BBC News UK Magazine (Lester, 2016). She is based in part on the actress Rita Hayworth in her title role in the 1946 film *Gilda*. She frequently tops the polls as the greatest female cartoon character. She celebrated her 20th anniversary in 2008 (Lester, 2016).

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Illustration 3a Rita Hayworth as *Gilda* 3b, 3c, 3d and 3e: Jessica Rabbit

### 3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used descriptive survey method to collect information through casual interviews and self-administered questionnaires. The research used the non-probability design and employed judgmental sampling to select a sample of 426 children (224 boys and 202 girls) aged 7 to 11 years

old from the six selected primary schools in Nairobi. The study used structured questionnaires with closed and open ended questions to collect primary data. A pilot study was used to test the validity and reliability of the research instrument using Cronbach's alpha on a selected sample of twenty-five students in the age bracket of 7-11 years from Nairobi Primary School. The collected data was edited, cleaned, coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics with the aid of SPSS version 11.0. The data was analyzed through straight tabulations and generated tables, graphs, and charts such as measures of central tendency such as means and modes and measures of dispersion such as the standard deviations.

## 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 The Top Choice Cartoons among the Children

The research sought to find out which animated cartoon series are most preferred by children. The respondents rated "Ben 10" as their most preferred animated cartoon program with 29.8%, while "Kim Possible" was rated second with 18.3%.

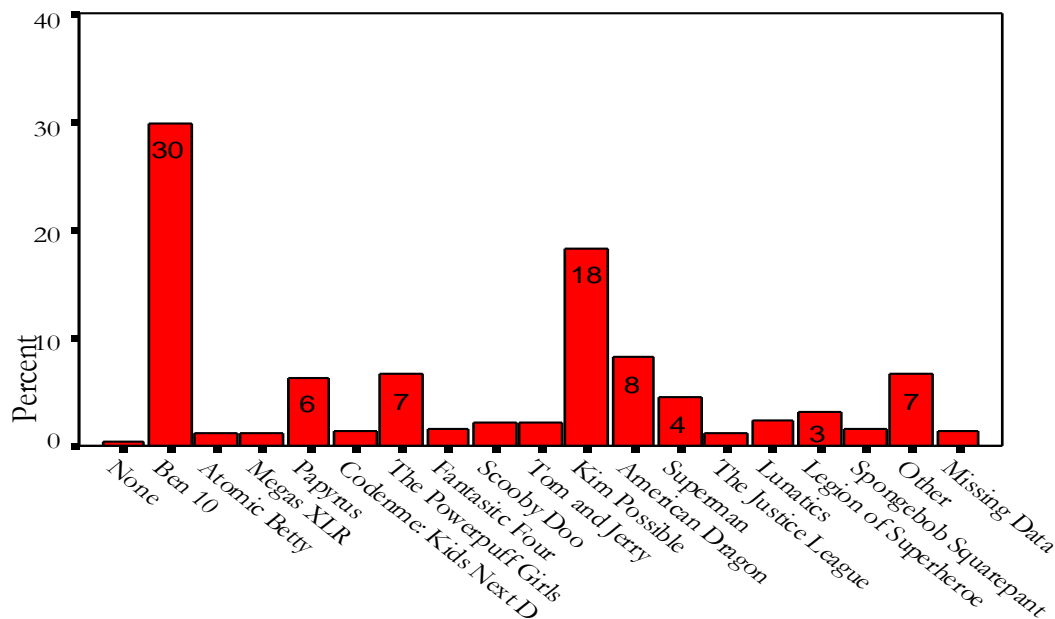


Figure 1: TV Cartoons Most Preferred by Respondents

Further, the respondent's friends also have "Ben 10" as their favourite cartoon (24.4%) and "Kim Possible" at 17.8% (Illustration 4). These two cartoon programs have as their main characters Ben and Kim who possess "super-powers" that enable them to fight evil and "save the world". Ben is portrayed to have a magic watch, "Omnitrix" that enables him to change form into any of ten different superheroes each with different abilities according to the villain he is fighting.



Illustration 4a *Ben 10* and 4b *Kim Possible*

Other cartoons that are highly rated in terms of preference are “American Dragon” (8%) and the Power puff girls (7%) Illustration 5.



Illustration 5a: *American Dragon* and 5a: *Power Puff Girls*

These cartoons are preferred for various reasons but key among them is that they are action-packed (23.9%), are funny (21.4%), enjoyable/ entertaining (17.4%) and interesting (10.4%), all of which fall under the theme of entertainment and/or amusement. The respondents also said they liked the animated cartoon characters and that cartoons are nice.



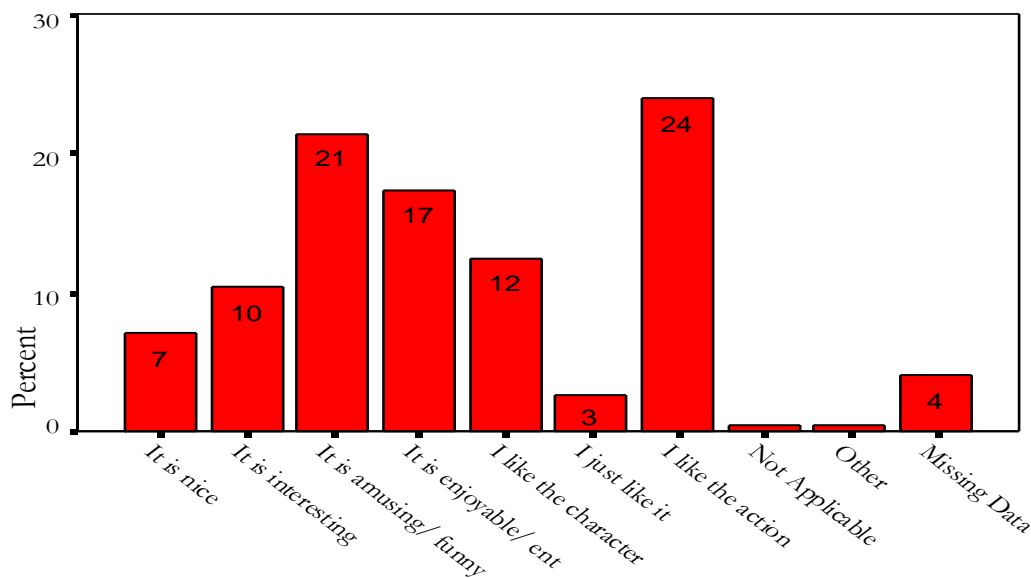


Figure 2: Reasons for Cartoon Preference

## 5.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Summary

The study also concluded that there are the reasons and views held by children in relation to how they rate their popular animated cartoons as “good” or “bad” from what they see and why. The respondents rated “Ben 10” as their most preferred animated cartoon program, with “Kim Possible” rated second, followed by “American Dragon” in third place and the Power puff girls coming in fourth. The two most popular cartoon programs have as their main characters Ben and Kim who possess “super-powers” that enable them to fight evil and “save the world”. These cartoons are preferred for various reasons but key among them is that they are action-packed, with fights and the idea of saving the world and saving people from danger. They are considered funny, enjoyable, entertaining, and interesting by the children. These characteristics all fall under the theme of entertainment and/or amusement.

The respondents' worst cartoon characters are “Johnny Bravo” followed by Ed, Edd and Eddy. Other worst cartoon characters worth mentioning are: “Bubbles” from the cartoon “The Power puff Girls”, the respondents found her to be very “babyish”. “Lazlo” from the cartoon “Camp Lazlo” is also unpopular; the respondents said that “Lazlo” is a boring character. The respondents disliked animated cartoon characters for what they term “boring”. Since the respondents mainly watch cartoons for the action and its entertainment purpose, characters that do not entertain, or are found not amusing, are considered boring. Other reasons given for disliking cartoon characters are ‘it is evil’ and ‘stupid’. Most of the animated cartoon characters associated with evil were the antagonists or the “bad guys” in the cartoon program. Some cartoon characters that act stupid were also seen to be highly unpopular.

## 5.2 Conclusions

Based on the study, the study concluded that children have different perceptions and various views about their popular cartoons because of their varying tastes and different sexes. They stated their different reasons for their preferences and dislikes for various animated cartoons. Most children found it normal to watch animated cartoons while eating and a smaller number while doing work at home. Children were able to identify the key messages that emanated from the animated cartoons that they watched and they were able to further rate the cartoons in order of preference, giving reasons for their choices.

## 5.3 Recommendations

Parents need to advocate for high quality programmes for children and removal inappropriate animated cartoons from the local TV stations. Parents should take interest in combating hyper-sexuality in animated cartoon and allow the children to stay young. Media corporations should not view children through an economic lens and they should be value-neutral. Furthermore, communications Commission of Kenya (CCK) and Kenya Film Censorship Board (KFCB), Ministry of Information and Communications should vet the content of animated cartoon before they are run on the TV stations and give advance clearance in an advisory capacity. There is no policies controlling the content in the animated aired on Kenyan TV stations.

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