

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Violent Representations in Animated Cartoons

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Abstract

Violence has traditionally been used as a humorous technique in cartoons. Growing minds are extremely influenced by what they see, and violent animations can show them instances of aggressive or violent behavior. The audience (children) may imitate the actions they observe, assuming that such behavior is acceptable or normal. This can lead to an increase in aggressive tendencies and a higher likelihood of engaging in physical or verbal aggression. So, violence plays a big part in how young people spend their time and how it affects their lives. Since the year 1950s, violence in Media has become a divisive topic; numerous investigations have been done on this subject. This paper examines the selected anthropomorphized animated cartoons with a critical eye to find new or better ways to explain violence in cartoons by using the content analysis method and social learning theory by Albert Bandura. This theory implies that seeing aggressive behavior will help the observer remember those behaviors; whether they decide to act aggressively can depend on other circumstances. The study explored "Doraemon, Tom and Jerry, and Powderpuff Girls" to establish the type of violence and the context of violence. These programs were selected because of their popularity, family programming status, and anthropomorphic characters. (*Top 10 Cartoons in India*, 2022). It is essential to have an accurate comprehension of what television viewers, particularly children, are exposed to.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, violence, comparative study, content analysis, social learning theory.

Introduction

The development of television has resulted in significant societal transformations. Researchers Hemalatha and Puttaswamy stated that “Television is called Home cinema” (Hemalatha R & Puttaswamy C.K, 2018). In recent years, the act of watching television has assumed a significant role in the daily routine of every individual. This medium has exerted significant influence over the daily lives of individuals. The utilization of theatrical elements in television programming enhances the efficacy of communication and facilitates the audience's comprehension of the conveyed information. Violence in cartoons is a topic that has generated considerable debate and discussion over the years. Cartoons have often depicted various forms of violence, ranging from slapstick humor to more realistic or intense portrayals.

The British Broadcasting Corporation’s definition of violence is “any act of physical force, with or without a weapon, used against oneself or another person” (Gunter, 2018). Animations with violence can potentially affect children in several ways: Majorly investigators Sabardila et al. found out that it "affects children's imitation of behavior (Sabardila et al., 2023). Children are highly influenced by what they see, and violence can provide them with examples of aggressive or violent behavior. They may imitate the actions they observe, assuming that such behavior is acceptable or normal. This can lead to an increase in aggressive tendencies and a higher likelihood of engaging in physical or verbal aggression.

Cartoons have an extensive historical track in which violence has been employed as a comedic mechanism. Certain classical cartoons (Looney Tunes" and "The Three Stooges") have featured characters engaging in exaggerated, slapstick violence, which was intended to elicit laughter rather than promote actual harm. Researcher Wijethilaka suggests that exposure to violent media “can influence children’s behavior and attitudes” (Wijethilaka, 2020). Young children may mimic aggressive behavior depicted in cartoons or grow desensitized to violence, yet the amount of these effects can differ by a child. Because of the potential impact of violent cartoons, many countries have rating systems in place to help parents and caregivers make informed decisions about the suitability of cartoons for their children. These ratings provide guidance regarding age appropriateness and the level of violence, allowing parents to choose content that aligns with their values and concerns.

On the other hand, violence is also considered as a solution. In the title "Reducing school violence through conflict resolution," authors Johnson and Johnson described violence as frequently portrayed as a means of “resolving conflicts or achieving goals in animations” (Johnson & Johnson, 1995), and children may develop a skewed perception that aggression is an effective strategy. They may believe that using violence is a practical solution in various situations, leading to potential problems in conflict resolution and social interactions. However, scholar Kaimara described that sometimes it can evoke fear and anxiety in a “few children because they have difficulty distinguishing between fiction and reality” (Kaimara et

al., 2022), leading to nightmares or general feelings of insecurity. It is important to note that not all children respond to violent animations in the same way, and individual factors such as temperament, family environment, and parental guidance play a significant role. Researcher Funk and others in their study suggested that “Parents and caregivers should be mindful of the content their children consume, engage in open discussions about violence, and provide appropriate guidance and context to help children understand the difference between fantasy and real-life consequences” (Funk et al., 2004).

Objective of the study

1. To expose the acts of violence in the select anthropomorphic Indian cartoons
2. To identify violence being more common than comic elements in cartoon programs

Review of literature

Gunter's article “Violence in Children’s Programmes on British Television” examines British children's television violence. The author examines how such content may “affect children and the incidence and type of violence in these programs” (Gunter & Harrison, 1997). His case studies and empirical research illuminate violence in children's programs. To protect children's health and well-being, the article stresses responsible content production and control. Researchers, politicians, and media professionals may use Gunter's literature analysis to gain a thorough understanding of British television violence in children's programs.

Researcher Barbara’s “Media and Children's Aggression, Fear, Altruism" examines how media exposure affects children's aggressiveness, fear, and altruism. This research shows that “youngsters who watch violent media are more aggressive, and it also explores how fear-inducing media affects children's emotions and anxieties. It highlights the necessity to study how media affects children's fear” (Barbara et al., 2008). The research paper highlights the complexity of media exposure's effects on children's behavior. Parental advice, media literacy programs, and responsible media use can offset harmful impacts and encourage beneficial social development in youngsters.

Steven's study "Cartoon Violence and Aggression in Youth" investigates the relationship between cartoon violence and youth aggression. The results of this study suggest that teen antagonism may be increased by violent cartoons. Violent cartoons normalize and “influence children priming and emotional arousal also mediate the effects of cartoon violence on aggressiveness” (Kirsh, 2006). Finally, the researcher emphasizes the necessity of parental monitoring and media literacy in reducing cartoon violence. It stresses the need for more study on the long-term effects of violent cartoons and strategies that can reduce youth aggression. Steven's work adds to the literature on media influence and gives vital information for educators, parents, and legislators trying to promote healthy media intake in children. A thesis by Leo Baro examines how TV violence affects kids. His work shows the harm of continuous TV violence; he found that "recurrent TV violence can enhance juvenile

hostility, desensitization to real-world violence, and antisocial behavior” (Baro, n.d.). Parental mediation and media literacy may reduce the detrimental impacts of television violence on children.

Author Tahir Mahmoud's study "The impact of violent cartoons on the behavior of children" focuses on a case study undertaken in South Punjab, this research offering a regional perspective on the topic. The study includes a sample of youngsters from the region and examines their exposure to violent cartoons using questionnaires and behavioral observations. It seeks to ascertain the extent to which “violent cartoons impact children's behavior and to identify potential mitigating variables or solutions” (Tahir Mahmood et al., 2021).

Research gap

Violence has been the subject of several studies in the areas of case studies, interview techniques, experimental studies, etc. Research on the link with animated cartoons in India is limited. So therefore, the selected animated cartoons have to be investigated in this field. So, this will be considered as a research gap, and it is going to be applied in this research.

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the social learning theory in the depiction of violence in the top 3 Indian animations 2023, namely “Doraemon, Tom and Jerry, and the Powderpuff Girls” (*Top 10 Cartoons in India*, 2022). The sample episodes were selected based on their strong alignment with the research objectives.

Research question

1. How much violence is shown in children's programming compared to other types of animated programming?
2. How do children's programming context aspects link with violent portrayals compared to other types of programming?

Conceptual Framework: Social learning theory

Social learning theory, developed by psychologist Albert Bandura (Darling, 2016, p. 141), is a psychological framework that emphasizes the role of observational learning and modeling in the acquisition of new behaviors. There are some key concepts and principles associated with social learning theory: Observational learning, Modeling, Vicarious reinforcement, Self-efficacy, Reinforcement and punishment, and Reciprocal determinism” (Bandura, A., 2020). Social learning theory has been widely applied in a variety of fields, including education, therapy, and social behavior analysis. It highlights the importance of observational learning, modeling, and the social context in shaping human behavior and learning processes.

Content analysis method

Content analysis is a widely used research method in the field of literature, which involves the systematic examination and interpretation of textual material to uncover meaningful patterns, themes, and insights. It provides a structured approach to analyzing literary works, allowing researchers to delve deeper into the content and extract valuable information. One of the primary objectives of content analysis in literature is to understand the underlying themes and messages conveyed by the author. By carefully examining the text, researchers can identify recurring motifs, symbols, and metaphors that contribute to the overall meaning of the work. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of the author's intentions and the literary techniques employed to convey those intentions. Moreover, content analysis allows researchers to explore the social, cultural, and historical context of the literature. By examining the language, setting, and character portrayals, researchers can gain insights into the period, cultural values, and societal norms depicted in the work. This analysis helps in uncovering the underlying ideologies and perspectives that influenced the author and shaped the narrative.

The research article “Cartoons’ Effect in Changing Children's Mental Response and Behavior” by Habib and Soliman also stated that “Cartoon content affects school-going children’s attitude and manners “with experimental study (Habib & Soliman, 2015). Content analysis also facilitates the examination of literary elements such as plot structure, character development, and narrative techniques. Researchers can analyze the progression of the story, the growth or transformation of characters, and the use of literary devices such as foreshadowing, irony, or symbolism. This detailed examination aids in understanding the narrative structure and the author's skillful manipulation of literary techniques to enhance the reader's experience. Furthermore, content analysis in literature can be used to explore the representation of gender, race, and other social constructs. By scrutinizing the portrayal of characters and their interactions, researchers can identify stereotypes, biases, or power dynamics present in the text. This analysis contributes to a critical understanding of how literature reflects and influences societal perceptions and norms. In addition, content analysis allows for the comparison and contrast of different literary works or authors. Researchers can examine multiple texts within a specific genre, time period, or thematic context to identify similarities, differences, and trends. This comparative analysis provides a broader perspective on literary movements, influences, and the evolution of certain themes or narrative styles over time. Advancements in technology have expanded the possibilities of content analysis in literature. Digital tools and software enable researchers to analyze large volumes of text more efficiently. Text mining and natural language processing techniques allow for automated coding and categorization of textual data, saving time and increasing the accuracy of the analysis. These technological advancements have broadened the scope of content analysis and opened new avenues for research in the field of literature. However, it is important to note that content analysis in literature has its limitations. It requires careful interpretation and subjective judgment, as different researchers may interpret the same text differently.

Additionally, content analysis may overlook subtle nuances and complexities present in literary works, as it tends to focus on the explicit content rather than the aesthetic qualities of the text. In conclusion, content analysis is a valuable research method in the study of literature. It offers a systematic approach to uncovering themes, examining literary techniques, and exploring social and cultural contexts.

Sample size

This research concentrated on only three animated programs among the top ten in India based on violent representations. Researchers viewed numerous episodes to examine violent behavior/ activity by main characters. The study considered the below-mentioned television shows in the top 3 Indian animations in 2023, namely "Doraemon, Tom and Jerry, and the Powderpuff Girls" (*Top 10 Cartoons in India, 2022*).

Discussion/ Findings

The animated series "Tom and Jerry" is well-known for its depiction of comical fighting between the house cat Tom and the smart mouse Jerry. The show features exaggerated and slapstick-style violence, where Tom and Jerry engage in various physical altercations, such as chasing, hitting, and using various objects as weapons against each other. It is crucial to comprehend that the portrayal of violence in this animated cartoon is characterized by a significant degree of stylization and primarily serves the purpose of eliciting humor rather than endorsing actual harm or aggression. Researchers stated that this program has an "impact on developing youngsters since it contains violent content that might negatively affect young children's developing minds and encourage them to engage in violent behavior" (*The Tom Jerry Show Influence Growing Children Because This Cartoon Contains Some | Course Hero, n.d.*).

The violent depictions in the "Tom and Jerry" cartoon are presented in a cartoonish and unrealistic manner, often accompanied by humorous sound effects and exaggerated reactions. The characters endure various forms of harm, such as falls, crashes, and blows, but they quickly recover without any lasting injuries. The humor stems from the absurdity of the situations and the characters' resilience. Some concerns associated with violence in cartoons, in general, can apply to this cartoon as well. These concerns include the possibility of children imitating the aggressive behaviors they see, desensitization to violence, and the perception that violence is an acceptable means of resolving conflicts. However, this animation has been enjoyed by audiences of various generations since its creation in the 1940s. The show is often recognized as a classic and has maintained its popularity over the years. Many viewers appreciate the show's humor and the comedic rivalry between the two main characters. Ultimately, the impact of violence in "Tom and Jerry" or any other cartoon depends on the individual child and their context. Parents and caregivers can play an essential role by discussing the content with their children, providing appropriate guidance, and monitoring their viewing habits to ensure a healthy understanding of fantasy versus reality

and appropriate behavior. Researcher Ghilzai stated that in his research, watching Tom and Jerry, "children love to play such a violent game with their siblings and classmates" (Ghilzai et al., 2017, p. 112).

The subsequent cartoon Doraemon is a highly regarded manga and anime series originating from Japan, which was created by the renowned artist Fujiko F. Fujio. The narrative revolves around the exploits of a mechanized feline character known as Doraemon, who undertakes temporal journeys from the twenty-second century to aid a young protagonist named Nobita Nobi. Doraemon has captivated audiences worldwide with its endearing characters, imaginative stories, and heartwarming messages. The anthropomorphic main character, Doraemon, is a blue robotic cat with a pouch on his belly from which he produces various futuristic gadgets. He is sent back in time to help Nobita, a kind-hearted but lazy and often clumsy boy who faces various challenges in his everyday life. One of the central themes in Doraemon is friendship. Doraemon becomes Nobita's best friend and mentor, providing guidance and support through his gadgets and wisdom. Their friendship blossoms as they navigate through school, family, and various adventures together. The series emphasizes the importance of loyalty, empathy, and understanding in building strong friendships. Another prominent aspect of Doraemon is the exploration of moral values and life lessons. Each episode typically presents a problem or dilemma that Nobita faces, and with Doraemon's help, he learns important lessons about honesty, perseverance, courage, and kindness. The stories often highlight the consequences of one's actions and the importance of making responsible choices.

The setting of Doraemon combines elements of the past, present, and future. Nobita and his friends live in a suburban neighborhood, attending school and engaging in everyday activities. However, Doraemon's futuristic gadgets introduce elements of advanced technology and fantastical adventures. This blending of different periods creates a unique and imaginative world that captivates viewers of all ages. Doraemon's popularity can be attributed to its universal appeal. The series touches on relatable themes and emotions that resonate with audiences worldwide. The characters are well-developed and endearing, with each possessing distinct personalities and quirks. Nobita's struggles and insecurities make him a relatable protagonist, while Doraemon's warmth and wisdom make him a beloved mentor figure.

Furthermore, Doraemon tackles social issues and addresses topics such as environmental conservation, cultural traditions, and the importance of education. It encourages viewers to reflect on these subjects and promotes positive values and behaviors. The series has become an important cultural icon in Japan and has gained international recognition, with translations and adaptations in various languages.

Violence: Some examples of violence representations in Doraemon may include:

Slapstick Comedy: Doraemon often incorporates slapstick humor, where characters engage in exaggerated physical actions such as tripping, falling, or bumping into things. This

type of comedy may involve characters playfully hitting or knocking each other, but it is not meant to be harmful or aggressive. **Light Fighting:** Occasionally, characters in Doraemon engage in light fights or skirmishes. These conflicts are usually non-threatening and are more comedic than intense. They may involve characters playfully hitting each other, chasing one another, or engaging in harmless scuffles. **Fantasy Elements:** Doraemon features various futuristic gadgets that can be used for playful purposes or solving problems. While some of these gadgets may involve mild action, such as characters shooting beams or using gadgets for self-defense, the violence depicted is typically fictional and not portrayed realistically.

Finally, the cartoon "The Powerpuff Girls" is primarily known for its light-hearted and comedic approach to storytelling, with a focus on the adventures and challenges faced by the three young superheroines. However, it is important to note that while the show does contain action sequences and confrontations, the violence depicted is generally portrayed in a stylized and exaggerated manner suitable for a younger audience.

The violence can be described as cartoonish and fantastical, often involving over-the-top action and comedic elements. The villains and their actions are exaggerated and meant to be seen as fictional and divorced from reality. The show frequently employs slapstick humor and visual gags to mitigate any potential impact of the violence on its viewers. When it comes to physical altercations, the Powerpuff Girls engage in battles with various villains using their superpowers. However, the emphasis is not on realistic or graphic depictions of violence but rather on the creative and imaginative use of their abilities to outsmart and defeat their adversaries. The action sequences are fast-paced and energetic, featuring dynamic animation and choreography.

The show uses bright colors, visual effects, and sound design to further emphasize the fictional and exaggerated nature of the violence. Explosions, lasers, and other visual elements are often used to add excitement and entertainment value to the action scenes. The impact and consequences of the violence are downplayed, with villains typically being defeated without sustaining any lasting harm. While physical altercations are present in the show, they are usually accompanied by comedic moments, witty dialogue, and clever resolutions. The Powerpuff Girls often employ their intelligence, teamwork, and problem-solving skills to overcome challenges, prioritizing non-violent solutions whenever possible. The underlying theme of the series is often centered around friendship, compassion, and the importance of doing what is right.

The show is intended for a young audience, and the violence is depicted in an age-appropriate way and within the bounds of a children's cartoon. The creators of the show have taken care to strike a balance between action and comedy, ensuring that the violence is not portrayed in a way that would be excessively intense or disturbing for the target demographic. In conclusion, while "The Powerpuff Girls" does contain instances of violence, they are presented in a stylized, exaggerated, and comedic manner. The show emphasizes imaginative

action sequences and relies on cartoonish elements to mitigate any potential impact on its viewers. It maintains an overall light-hearted and positive tone, with the underlying messages of friendship, teamwork, and standing up against evil prevailing throughout the series.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the portrayal of violence in cartoons is a complex issue that involves considering factors such as the intended audience, responsible storytelling, and the potential impact on children. So, parents, caregivers, and content creators need to engage in ongoing discussions. In anthropomorphic animations, which feature animals or objects with human characteristics, acts of violence are relatively common but are typically portrayed in a comedic or non-threatening manner. These shows often employ slapstick humor, exaggerated physical comedy, and cartoonish violence to entertain viewers, particularly children. While anthropomorphic animations may depict characters engaging in conflicts, fights, or pranks, the violence is usually harmless, temporary, and lacks any real-world consequences.

Cartoon characters might get hit, fall, crash into objects, or engage in comedic battles, but they quickly recover with no lasting injuries. The primary purpose of such violence is to generate humor and amusement rather than to promote or endorse real-life aggression. It is important to recognize the fictional nature of anthropomorphic animations and their intended audience, which is often children. These shows utilize violence as a tool for entertainment but typically present it in a light-hearted, non-threatening way. The emphasis is on comedic situations and exaggerated physicality rather than promoting or encouraging real acts of violence.

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