

Research Journal of Pharmaceutical, Biological and Chemical Sciences

Exploring The Representation Of Female Roles In Classical Versus Contemporary Cartoons: Analysing Stereotype Reinforcement Versus Disagreement.

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ABSTRACT

Classic cartoons, like those from Disney's early era, frequently depicted female characters in stereotypical and often restrictive roles. Starting in the 1980s and especially in the 2000s and beyond, there has been a notable shift towards portraying more dynamic, independent, and multifaceted female characters. It was selected on the basis of the most popular cartoons of 1990's and 2000's as put forth by Internet Movie Database [IMDB]. Classic cartoons encompasses Popeye the sailor man, Dexter's Laboratory, The Powerpuff Girls, The Jetsons and Scooby Doo. Contemporary cartoons includes Chota Bheem, Jackie Chan, Phineas and Ferb, Ben 10 and Shinnchan. The cartoons were watched and the traits were extracted from their official website. The female characters in these cartoons were critically analysed. Their traits were identified and the author has tried to generalize them, on whether it is reinforcing the stereotype or disagreeing with it. Then the obtained data is discussed. From the above thematic study we can clearly understand that the contemporary cartoons on a larger scale are involved in the stereotypical representation of the female roles. Classic cartoons seems to portray a combination of both. The gender representation in cartoons are of much importance.

Keywords; Gender, Stereotype, Animation, Children, Media.

<https://doi.org/10.33887/rjpbcs/2025.16.4.17>

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INTRODUCTION

According to The Oxford Dictionary, cartoon is a film or TV show made by photographing a series of gradually changing drawings of models, so that they look as if they are moving [1]. Cartoons prevail as an important recreation for kids. The vivid colours, sounds, voice modulation and the presentation of the protagonists and antagonists extensively attract and make the children addicted to it [2]. According to the oxford dictionary stereotypes refers to a fixed and oversimplified generalization about a group of people [3]. If the individuals behaviour pattern, traits, role or their appearance conform to these pre-defined stereotypes then it results in reinforcing them further more. If the contrary happens then the stereotype is disagreed. This traditional roles defined for women has proved to weaken their attitude [4]. At the early stages of development, the ability to capture information from their visual senses and the ability to retain it is relatively very high. So this paves the way for the construction of their ideas, thoughts and they become conditioned to certain notions, stereotypes and opinions which are irreversible. Piaget developed the Stages of Cognitive development. According to this theory the child's socialization process includes conforming to the gender roles and the societal norms. Freud also have stated that children tend to internalize the gender [5]. As stated by Bandura in his Social Learning Theory children learn and acquire certain behaviour by observing the models in cartoons, books or fictions [6]. The gender representation in cartoons are unrealistic and biased. This creates a long lasting impression on the definition of gender roles in children. The male roles are usually portrayed to be dominating, aggressive, and powerful while the female roles are presented as emotionally vulnerable, failure, dependent, irresponsible and more glamorous. An analysis has proved that there seems to be stereotypical representation of men and women in the cartoons aired between 1980's [7]. So from the above discussed theories we can clearly understand that, children are prone to acquire and act out the traits that are reinforced by the major roles in the cartoons. The female roles are usually pictured at a disadvantage they are given less screen time, fewer role, less dialogues, are depicted as a sign of weakness, attraction and are used as a show doll with revealing clothes [8]. There exists a gap between the portrayal of women in the cartoons and their actual position in the society. In the cartoons female roles are confined to secondary characters and a very few primary roles are assigned, by such means stereotyping women [9]. So there exists a higher probability for the boy children to believe those stereotyped portrayal and the girl children may imitate and internalize the displayed feminine behaviour [2]. This biased or stereotyped view restricts the kid's mind set and make them resistant towards change in the future. The results of a study done to examine the gender role representation in cartoons revealed that the stereotyped representation of male and female had a direct relation to the child's development of ideas regarding male's and female's position [10]. We live in a patriarchal society, where men have the dominant hand. The cartoons represent women with more traditional feminine cues, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal society. As the children observe and learn through these cartoons their idea about patriarchal society gets strengthened [11]. Now a days there appears to be a shift on portraying gender equality because of its growing importance [12]. There also appears to be a disagreement in the pattern of traits and behaviour exhibited by some female roles of certain cartoons. For instance in the famous cartoon series 'Popeye the sailor man' the female lead - Olive have been portrayed with feminine stereotypical traits but her appearance contradicts the stereotype. She is pictured to be taller than Popeye which is against our society's belief. The cartoons of 1990's began to make the roles less biased and stereotyped. The researchers observed a significant difference between the cartoons of 1980s and 1990's [7]. Female centric cartoons like 'The Powerpuff Girls' operated in polarities with the stereotypical beliefs. The contemporary cartoons have also displayed certain traits that disapprove the biased beliefs. The portrayal of characters in a more balanced and equal manner without labelling the traits is of much importance, as this promotes the socialization and gender identity process of children. This analysis on examining the gender stereotypical traits portrayed by the female roles of Classic and Contemporary cartoons is significant and holds importance. Because there seems to be a research gap present. All the other studies have focused only on a particular period of cartoons and not on both. The results have been clear enough that the female roles have been biased and stereotyped. But there exists certain exceptions to it. So this analysis will focus on the difference between the cartoons of two ages. By understanding this we will be able to gain insight on how it further influences children's perception and their level of socialization.

METHOD

In order to analyse the traits displayed by the female roles in both classic and contemporary cartoons, five cartoons pertaining to each category was chosen. It was selected on the basis of the most popular cartoons of 1990's and 2000's as put forth by Internet Movie Database [IMDB]. Classic cartoons

encompasses Popeye the sailor man [13], Dexter's Laboratory [14], The Powerpuff Girls [15], The Jetsons [16] and Scooby Doo [17]. Contemporary cartoons includes Chota Bheem [18], Jackie Chan [19], Phineas and Ferb [20], Ben 10 [21] and Shinchon [22]. The cartoons were watched and the traits were extracted from their official website. The female characters in these cartoons were critically analysed. Their traits were identified and the author has tried to generalize them, on whether it is reinforcing the stereotype or disagreeing with it. Then the obtained data is discussed.

RESULTS

Five classical cartoons and contemporary cartoons were selected on the basis of its popularity. The cartoons were reviewed in order to identify the traits displayed by the female roles of each cartoon. Data analysis enables us to understand the themes behind the traits as to whether they are reinforcing the stereotypes or contradicting it. The traits recorded were scattered and did not belong exactly to one of the themes. The data analysis focuses only on the major traits of the characters.

Table 1

Type of cartoon	Cartoon Name	Character Analysed	Trait Identified	Stereotype Reinforcement / Stereotype Disagreement
Classic	Popeye – the sailor man	Olive Oyl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependant • Inconsiderate • Passive • Trouble Maker 	Stereotype Reinforcement
Classic	Dexter's Laboratory	Dee – Dee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talkative • Curious • Active • Playful/Naughty • Unknowledgeable • Optimistic • Irritating 	Stereotype Disagreement
Classic	Scooby Doo	Velma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligent • Modest • Co-operative and supportive • Brave and bold • Observant 	Stereotype Disagreement
Classic	The Jetsons	Jane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caring • Pleasing • Well-mannered • Supportive and helpful • Strong mouthed 	Stereotype reinforcement
Classic	The Powerpuff Girls	Bubbles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm • Helpful • Sweet and empathize • Joyous 	Stereotype reinforcement
		Buttercup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self pride • Strong and fierce • Impulsive • Optimistic 	Stereotype Disagreement
		Blossom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive • Commander and planner • Supportive • Protective 	Stereotype Disagreement
Contemporary	Phineas and Ferb	Candace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puffery • Fuzzy and selfish • Impressionable 	

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nit-picker • Diligent • Inconsiderate 	Stereotype Reinforcement
Contemporary	Chota Bheem	Chutki	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kind and caring • Helping and encouraging • Intelligent • Defenceless • Sweet and curious • Passive 	Stereotype Reinforcement
Contemporary	Ben 10 – Alien Force	Gween	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informative • Brave, bold and powerful • Caring and concerned • Active and stubborn • Critical 	Stereotype Disagreement
Contemporary	Jackie Chan	Jade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bold and impulsive • Energetic • Irresponsible • Defenceless • Trouble maker • Sensitive 	Stereotype reinforcement
Contemporary	Shin Chan	Misae Nohara	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecure • Caring and nurturing • Irritable • Frugal • Jealous • Responsible 	Stereotype Reinforcement

Table 1 shows the various major traits identified from the female roles of the popular cartoons of 1900's and the 2000's i.e. Classic and Contemporary cartoons. It also gives us a clear picture of the themes underlying the traits. This table shows that both classic and contemporary cartoons have portrayed certain roles that reinforce the stereotype and few others that contradict it. The conclusion has been drawn only by focusing on the major traits of the female character, as there can be a number of other traits the character possess. The themes are further clearly discussed in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

From table 1 we have gained the clarity about the themes underlying the traits of the character. This analyses is important as it takes hold of young minds. Now, let's discuss the themes in detail.

Stereotype reinforcement

Classic Cartoons

Popeye – The sailor man

In Popeye the sailor man, Olive is the main female lead. There were many traits identified which seemed to reinforce the stereotypical beliefs. She was a person who always creates or gets into trouble. She was passive and always relayed on the male lead for solutions and protection. There exists a research that states that women in cartoons were visualised to be more attractive [8]. Olive also was portrayed to be more attractive and admiring, thereby supporting the above stated research. Olive also gave importance to her makeup and was seen correcting them even in a critical situation of the episode Hits and Missiles.

The Jestons

Jane is the main female lead of the Jestons. She was a dutiful mother who was calm, well-mannered and nurturing. She was pictured as a traditional feminine figure who acts pleasingly, understands everyone and lives for the family. Jane also gave importance to her body and makeup. Through the analysis we were

able to point out that this character reinforced the stereotype and was not given much importance. Researches also supported the notion that women are highly underrepresented in children's cartoons [23].

The Powerpuff Girls

Bubbles, Buttercup and Blossom are the protagonist of this cartoon. Among these three Bubbles possessed the all girly, stereotyped traits. She was defined to be sweet, sensitive, less powerful, apologetic, cute and innocent. We can clearly observe that among the three, Bubbles was the most energetic and curious one. She takes part in all the rescue operations, but remains as a supporter and not an initiator. Being a product of U.S production house it enjoyed good female representation. But it tend to conform to the biased beliefs [24].

Contemporary Cartoons

Phineas and Ferb

Candace, the elder sister of Phineas and Ferb is the principal female lead of this cartoon. Her presentation in the cartoon is biased, as she possess a number of stereotypical traits [25]. She is pictured to be a nit-picker. Candace is consistent in complaining her brothers but fails in each attempt. She is seen always with her phone and records an admiration for a boy. This is supported by a research that states that the female roles in cartoons were portrayed to be romantic [26]. She has self-pride and feels insecure. In the entire cartoon she is pictured to be beautiful and in all pink clothes. Major of her traits seem to support the existing stereotypes.

Chota Bheem

Chutki, a friend of Bheem is the main female protagonist. She is the wisest and comes up with ideas and important revelations. She is curious, loyal, and altruistic. She acts with love and kindness even to animals. She provides Ladoo's for her friends. But in time of action we cannot observe much of Chutki's role in it. She is a good team member and is cooperative. The result of a research states that the characterization are stereotyped in Chota Bheem to the extent that it influences the children [27]. This role strongly reinforces the stereotypical beliefs present around.

Jackie Chan

Jade, cousin of Jackie Chan accompanies him throughout the cartoon. She is very impulsive and curious. But she is defenceless, only with the help of some magical talisman she can fight. She gets into trouble easily because of her impulsiveness. She is bubbling with energy and is very sensitive. This character has a mixture of traits that reinforce and contradict the stereotypes. But from the majority of traits we can conclude that it is reinforcing the faulty beliefs. The development of technology have aided in picturing the female roles to be more prosocial and able rather than showing them as a tool for destruction, which can be taken as a positive sign of movement towards gender equality[28].

Shin Chan

Misae is the mother of Shinchan. Misae is loving, nurturing and concerned about her family. But she gets easily annoyed and experiences anger outbursts. She is very economical but acts lavishly at times. She is jealous about others and seeks admiration from others. From the analysis we can also understand that she is a shopaholic. So she is pictured as the traditional mother figure thereby reinforcing the stereotype. Such portrayal in Shinchan can cause an adverse effect in children. Boys may start to feel a sense of increased importance and girls may start feeling like second class citizens [29].

Stereotype Disagreement

Classic Cartoons

Dexter's Laboratory

Dee Dee is the elder sister of Dexter. She is very curious about the new inventions of Dexter and does something which causes chaos. This cartoon portrays Dee Dee to be less intelligible than Dexter. She is all girly whirling around wrapped up in pink clothes and practicing Ballerina. She is always chattering and seems to over act. She is characterised to be playful, naughty and very active. Dee Dee is very optimistic and cares for her brother. This character has a combination of traits but the major one points out that Dee Dee is out going and very flexible. Her principal traits seems to act at polarities from that of the stereotypical expectations, but she also possess certain other minimal traits that conform to the faulty misconceptions.

Scooby Doo

Velma is one among the gang of friends. In the entire series of cartoon we can find her lion's share in unravelling the mystery. She is portrayed to be very bold, brave, Intelligent and eager. She is very calm and rational. She usually cracks the code then the male lead proceeds the operation. She is the smartest of them all. During the analysis we can find that she takes initiative and is very optimistic. Velma remains the 'unsung hero of mystery', thereby disagreeing the long existing stereotypes.

The Powerpuff Girls

The characterization of Blossom and Buttercup seems to contradict the stereotypical beliefs. Blossom acts as a leader. She plans and take initiatives which is then followed by her sisters. She has a critical mind and is very protective of her sisters. On the other hand buttercup is the fighter. She is very bold, tough and strong. She finds it funny to pull the legs of Bubbles. She has a quick temper. All the three never give up on each other and are always united. A research has revealed that the cartoons of 1990's and 2000's has significantly portrayed more female roles using powers, which is a major improvement in breaking the gender stereotypes [30].

Ben 10 – Alien Force

Qween is the cousin of Ben. She stands for her cousin throughout and guides him. She is strong mouthed and critical. She is portrayed to be fierce, sensitive, brave, bold and knowledgeable. She has her own magical power and takes initiative at any moment of danger or need. She is caring and protective of her cousin. The cartoon also pictures her as an romantic figure by showing her admiration for Kevin. Qween's character seems to contradict the stereotypical traits.

Limitations

The following are some of the limitation of the study

- Only five classic and contemporary cartoons were selected.
- Only a limited number of episodes were reviewed.
- Majority of the cartoons does not belong to the regional countries.

So future studies can focus on analysing a cartoon that is regional or can review the entire cartoon to get a wider clarity about the traits displayed by the female roles. They can also take into consideration some other classic or contemporary cartoon.

CONCLUSION

From the above thematic study we can clearly understand that the contemporary cartoons on a larger scale are involved in the stereotypical representation of the female roles. Classic cartoons seems to portray a combination of both. The gender representation in cartoons are of much importance. The viewers of these cartoons are mostly kids, they are on their formative age. So these faulty representations can cause biased perception of gender on children. Once the impression is formed it is relatively very hard to change it. Thus we can conclude that the cartoons should picture the female roles in a more stable and knowledgeable manner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to acknowledge the directors and other professionals who were a part of the cartoons that were reviewed.

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