

# DO CHILDREN MEDIA CONTENT OVERSTEPPING THE MARK? AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER BASED PROBLEMATIC, EVIL, AND CRIMINAL THEMES PRESENTED IN CHILDREN CARTOON SHOWS.

<sup>1</sup>DR. ATTIA ZULFIQAR, <sup>2</sup>DR. AMNA ZULFIQAR, <sup>3</sup>DR. QASIM MEHMOOD

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor

Department of Media and Communication Studies  
National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

Department of Media and Communication Studies  
National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor

Department of Media and Communication Studies  
National University of Modern Languages Islamabad

**Abstract:** *The current paper was designed to explore the gender-based criminal and evil activities, bad manners and problematic themes in children cartoon shows. Approximately 34 hours long 150 episodes of three channels namely Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon were randomly collected out of which 523 problematic themes related to gender-based attitudes were recorded. The study found that the male characters were more dominantly shown in displaying different criminal, evil and problematic attitudes as compared to female characters. A great number of Crude mannerisms, illegalities, defiance, as well as other forms of social and ethical rebellion were found in the content. There are an excessive number of instances where scamming, lying, cheating, stealing, and other egregious behaviours have been associated with the possession of a higher intellect in males. Circumvention of societal norms and practices are typically depicted as praise-worthy behaviours.*

**Keywords:** *Entertainment, Television, Children Cartoon, Gender Based Themes.*

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### Introduction

In the 21st-century media and technology has become a large part of our children's lives. The electronic world is also observing a dramatic change in terms of new gadgets and their usage. Television was considered as one of the most dominant media outlets until recently it has been challenged by iPods, instant texting, iPads, mobiles, computer, emails, and tablets. Most children have unrestricted access to all kind of media, especially television. Children are exposed to a variety of messages without adult supervision; thus it puts them in a vulnerable position. Exposure to harmful content is related to the well-being of our young children and content matters - a lot especially when it is unsupervised (Field, 2000).

The entertainment industry is bombarding their audience with engaging and entertaining productions at local, global, national, and regional platforms. Media industries from developed countries having their tentative agendas are influencing the global consumers on a cultural, economic and ethical level, especially those living in underprivileged third world countries. Underdeveloped countries depend on global media to fulfill their entertainment needs and all this without realizing the effects of harmful content imported in the name of entertainment especially for children (Waterella, 2001).



Billions of people entertain themselves and bring pleasure to their life through the entertainment industry, but it's also been criticized for inflicting negative effects on our children, it also damages our attention spans, demeans classical culture and promotes trivial vulgar tastes whilst also endorsing violence, diverging audience, and destabilizing communities (Blakley, 2001).

The quality and appropriateness of the content according to the age group of the children is a matter of prime importance. The research done by 'The future of children' includes key findings related to media content. This study illuminates the fact that it's not the time spent on media, but rather its content that determines its constructive or destructive effects. Media multitasking has made it difficult to keep a record of child media usage. Children's media content should ideally promote positive values i.e altruism, pro-social behavior, tolerance, teamwork, manners, and humanity. But some children media entertainment channels are promoting violence, subliminal sexual messages, and sacrilegious language. Some highly precarious behaviors like drug use, alcohol and smoking are also related to media exposure. The incongruous content exposure can lead to the adaptation of risky behaviors in children. (The Future of children, 2008).

Electronic media especially children's television entertainment programs have been facing strong criticism for their negative impacts on young viewers. One of the major concerns is how early exposure can sway cognitive development. Researchers tried to focus on the positive impacts of well- designed, informative, and age - appropriate media content and tried to provide suggestions to minimize their destructive effects (Huston. Wright, 1983). The modern symbolic environment in which we are living encompasses a large part of everyday life. Our perception and social construction of reality are dependent on the mediated messages we receive through different sources (Bandura. 2001). Throughout much of the history of media effects research, great attention has been placed on the possible negative consequences media content might have on audiences' attitudes and behaviors (Bryant & Miron, 2004). As a content analysis study of the ethical analysis of children foreign media, the main thrust of this study is to explore and analyze ethical and unethical frames presented in children's cartoon programs. The theoretical framework employed for this study draws inspirations from the theory of framing related to the identification of ethical and unethical themes and gender representations in children entertainment channels.

Social Learning theory was developed in the 1960s by Albert Bandura. It states that mostly human learn behaviors and actions through observation or by others people. In modern times when media has captured the whole setup of information and entertainment, the media messages have become the main source of modeling and observational learning. The modern symbolic environment in which we are living encompasses a large part of everyday life. Our perception and social construction of reality are dependent on the mediated messages we receive through different sources (Bandura. 2001).

"Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action" (Bandura, 2001, p. 33).

Modeling theory focuses on the value of imitation and observation that have been adopted through the models and characters portrayed in media and how it is the reason of change when it comes to values, knowledge, and behavior. The modeling and imitation behavior is regularly strengthened and the individual relates himself to the inspired behavior and tries to copy it. He further added that "A vast amount of information about human values, a style of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media" (Bandura, 2001,p.38).

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) believes that "Children are influenced by media, they learn by observing, imitating, and making behaviors of their own" (2001, p.1224). In the last few years, much attention has been paid to the content of children media. Sensationalization of inappropriate media content like sex, violence, and anti- social behavior can result in inflicting harmful effects on children (Education Encyclopedia, 2015).



## 1. Methodology

Overall, 30 shows were randomly selected from Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon. A total of 150 episodes were analysed entailing a sum of 2022 minutes that is approximately 34 hours. Each word, frame, gesture, sound and character were analysed according to the categories defined in methodology. On average a single episode was of 13.48 minutes ( $n=150/2022$ ). Problematic themes were observed according to their exhibiter's gender, so each occurrence was coded as male or female. The basic purpose of the study was to check Problematic themes based on gender representation from the content selected for analysis.

This study has employed two different methods to find out the results of the proposed hypothesis and research questions.

1. Quantitative Manifest Content Analysis.
2. Qualitative Latent Content Analysis

**RQ1.** What problematic themes are most prevalent in children's cartoon channels?

**RQ 2.** What is the ratio of male and female characters in exhibiting problematic themes?

**Hypothesis 1.** Male characters more active at committing evil activities?

**Hypothesis 2.** Male characters more active at displaying bad manners?

**Hypothesis 3.** Male characters more active at committing criminal activities.

**1. Problematic Attitudes.** This category consists of bad manners like cheating, lying, criminal activities, and not following general societal values. This frame includes every type of bad attitude either a word, action, dialogue, storyline or behaviour. The following are questions that were developed in order to explore problematic attitude patterns present in an episode of a show.

1. What are the common patterns of problematic attitudes in children's cartoons?
2. What is the most common pattern of criminal tendencies?
3. How have criminal tendencies been portrayed?
4. Which gender role is more involved in showing problematic attitudes?

This study emphasizes on the rude manners observed in content such as actions which are regarded to be bad and immature by the public for example nose picking, drooling, burping, spitting, littering, pushing people standing in a queue, not using courteous phrases such as 'thank you' or 'please', not ready to facilitate senior citizens and women in public transport, speaking loudly, using a mobile phone where it's not allowed, careless driving and general risky behavior (Fyfe, 2005).

What this particular study focused on were the bad and criminal actions taken by characters such as dishonesty, cheating, teasing others, performing dangerous pranks, being disrespectful to elders and also towards relatives like brothers and sisters. A negative, rude and discriminating attitude is shown to people of the opposite gender. It also includes performing actions that are dangerous and hazardous to one's health even after being told by their parents or elders to refrain from doing so.

**1. Criminal tendencies.** It includes actions that are by law liable to punishment like stealing, cheating, robbing, vandalism, mob and gang activities and breaking the law (fyfe, 2005).

**2. Evil Activities.** It covers all such activities which are against societal manners like, lying, playing dangerous pranks and risky behaviours like racing or over speeding.

**3. Bad Manners.** Showing disrespect towards parents, teachers and elders, as well as negative attitudes towards siblings, displaying a hateful attitude towards the opposite sex and gender discrimination, (all occurrences was recorded with gender context).It also includes nose picking, dribbling, burning, spitting, littering, breaking queues, and not following general societal etiquettes (Fyfe,2005)



Data Analysis

**Table No 1 .Duration of the Content in Minutes**

Cartoon Channels	N	Mean	Minutes	Total Sum %
Cartoon Network	50	10.92	546	27.0%
Disney	50	18.26	913	45.2%
Nickelodeon	50	11.26	563	27.8%
Total	150	13.48	2022	100.0%

RQ 1. What problematic themes are most prevalent in children’s cartoon channels?

**2.Comparison of Criminal Activities, Evil Activities and Bad Manners Findings between Male and Female in Cartoon Shows**

**Table No 2. Total Problematic Attitudes in Cartoon Shows**

	Criminal Activities	Evil Activities	Bad Manners
N	150	150	150
Time	34 Hrs.	34 Hrs.	34 Hrs.
Mean	0.64	1.56	3.48
Total %	18.35%	37.28%	44.35%
Sum	96	195	232
Per Hour	2.82	4.85	6.82


Table 2 shows the summary findings of the number of total problematic attitude occurrences and its subcategories including criminal activities, evil activities and bad manners. This table illustrates all those frequencies in 3 subcategories of obscenity, its mean scores by male and female and its average per episode (n=150). It also shows the overall frequency of problematic attitudes per hour (n=34 hours) and per episode (n=150) in each category. A total of 523 problematic attitudes themes were recorded in 34 hours of viewing time in 3 channels Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon each with 10 shows and 5 episodes.

Overall bad Manners occurred at 44 % (n=232/523) almost 7 activities per hour (n= 34 hours) and 3 activities per episode (n=150). Evil activities at 37% (n=195/523) is at the second number with an average of 5 incidents per hour (n=34hours) and 2 incidents per episode (n=150) followed by criminal activities at 18% (n=96 /523) with an average of 3 incidents per hour (n=34hours).

RQ 2. What is the ratio of males and females in problematic attitudes themes?

**Table No 3. Difference in Problematic Attitudes Between Male and Female**

Gender	Criminal Activities	Evil Activities	Bad Manners
Male	N	150	150
	Mean	.59	.83
	Sum	89	125
	% of Total	92.7%	64.1%
	Per Hour	2.61	4.25
Female	Time	34 Hrs.	34 Hrs.
	N	150	150
	Mean	.05	.47
	Sum	7	70
			44



% of Total	Per 7.3%	35.9%	19.0%
Hour	0	2.05	1.29
Mean	.32	.65	.77
Sum	96	195	232
Total Mean	0.18	2.68	2.25
Total %	18.35%	37.28%	44.35%
Per Hour	2.82	4.85	6.82

Table 3 illustrates the frequencies of problematic attitudes exhibited by male and female in problematic attitude variables and its subcategories including criminal activities, evil activities and bad behaviours. This table explains a visible difference between the male and female in all three subcategories of problematic attitudes. Overall bad manners were at 44% (n=232/523), almost 7 activities per hour (n=34hours) and 2 activities per episode (n=150). Evil activities at 37% (n=195/523) is at the second number with an average of 5 incidents per hour (n= 34hours) and 3 incidents per episode (n=150) followed by criminal activities at 18 % (n=96/523) with an average of 3 incidents per hour (n= 34hours).

Bad manners theme occurrences for males are high at 81% (n=188/232) with an average of 6 incidents per hour (n= 34hours). Male characters also exhibited higher levels of evil activities at 64% (n=125/195) with an average of 4 incidents per hour (n= 34hours) and criminal activities at 92% (n= 89/96) with an average of 2 occurrences per hour (n= 34 hours).

**Hypothesis 1.** Males more active at committing evil activities than females?

**Table No 4. Evil Activities and Gender**

Gender	N	Mean	Sum	% Sum	Time/ 34 Hrs.
Male	150	.83	125	64.1%	4.25
Female	150	.47	70	35.9%	2.05
Total	300	2.68	195	100%	4.85

Table 4 shows the descriptive results of the evil activities score for males and females. Overall, 195 incidents of implied indecency occurred in 150 episodes, in 34 hours at the average of 5 incidents per hour, and almost 3 occurrences per episode. Evil activities by male show a higher number of occurrences in this category at 64% (m= 125/ 195) with an average of a single incident per episode (n=150) and 4 incidents per hour (n=34 Hours) as compared to female at 36% (70 /195) with an average 2 incidents per hour. Table no 28 shows descriptive results for implied indecency and apparently, there’s a difference between male and female scores on the evil activities variable. To check the statistical significance between the scores of males and females on the evil activities variable an independent sample t-test was conducted.

**Table No 5. Difference Between Male and Female in Evil Activities**

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Male	150	.83	1.866	1.960	298	.051
Female	150	.47	1.329			

An independent sample t-test was applied to compare the evil activities score for male and female. There was no significant difference between scores for male (M= .83, SD= 1.866) and female (M= .47, SD=1.392; t (298) =1.960, p= .051).

Independent sample t-tests show that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female in evil activities. Both males and females have played a significant role in performing



evil activities in children cartoon channels Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon broadcast by Pakistan Cable Networks.

**Hypothesis 2.** Males are more active at displaying bad manners than females

**Table No 6. Bad Manners and Gender**

Gender	N	Mean	Sum	% Sum	Time/ 34 Hrs.
Male	150	1.25	188	81.0%	6.39
Female	150	.29	44	19.0%	1.29
Total	300	1.66	232	100%	6.82

Table 6 shows the descriptive results of the bad manners score for male and female. Overall, 232 incidents of bad manners occurred in 150 episodes in 34 hours at an average of 7 incidents per hour and 1.66 occurrences per episode. Bad manners occurrences by male show a higher number of occurrences at 81% (m= 188/ 232) with an average of 1 incident per episode (n=150) and 6 incidents per hour (n=34 Hours) as compared to females at 19% (44/232) with an average of 1 incident per hour.

Table 6 shows descriptive results for nudity and apparently, there’s a difference between male and female scores. To check the statistical significance between the scores an independent sample t-test was conducted.

**Table No 7. Difference Between Male and Female in Bad Manners**

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Male	150	1.25	1.994	5.474	298	.000
Female	150	.29	.799			

An independent sample t-test was applied to compare the bad manners score for males and females. There was a significant difference between scores for male (M= 1.25, SD= 1.994) and female (M= .29, SD=.779; t (298) =5.474, p= .000. The magnitude of the differences in the means (mean difference=, .960, 95% CI: 1.305 to 1.326) was very large (eta squared = .038).

The result of independent sample t-test indicates that there is a huge difference in bad manner themes between males and female and male are highly active in performing bad manners in children cartoon shows telecasted on the children foreign cartoon channels of Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon broadcast by Pakistan Cable Networks.

**Hypothesis 3.** Male are more active at committing criminal activities than female

**Table No 8. Criminal Activities and Gender**

Gender	N	Mean	Sum	% Sum	Time/ 34 Hrs.
Male	150	.59	89	92.7%	2.61
Female	150	.05	7	7.3%	0
Total	300	.64	96	100%	2.82

Table 8 shows the descriptive results of criminal activity scores for male and female. Overall, 96 incidents of criminal activities occurred in 150 episodes in 34 hours at the average of 3 incidents per hour. Criminal Activity frequencies by males show a higher participation in criminal activities at 93% (m=89 / 96) with an average 6 incidents per hour (n=34 Hours) as compared to female’s participation in criminal activities at 7% (7/96).





## 2. Discussion

Problematic attitude variable was divided into 3 subcategories including bad manners, criminal activities and evil activities. A Total of 523 incidents of problematic attitudes occurred with an average of 15 incidents per hour, male characters exhibited 402 of the incidents and females had 150 occurrences in 34 hours of transmission. Children superhero cartoons show containing criminal activities were basically emerging from three large themes and one of them is based on greed. The basic explanations provided for criminal behaviours, are greed for money and organised crime (Lisa & Kort-Butler, 2012).

Children cartoon shows have common themes like lying cheating and stealing in the problematic attitude category. The most despicable problematic attitudes were observed in *Oggy and the Cockroaches*, *Joey*, *Marky* and *DeeDee* are always busy in stealing food, deceiving *Oggie*, making evil plans, playing harmful pranks and cheating. The worst part of the show is that all three cockroaches are totally indifferent to the miseries of their victims and laugh insanely when they find someone in trouble. They hit and slap each other without any reason and are always busy in evil activities. They play deadly tricks on people that could pose life-threatening situations if imitated in real life. In problematic attitudes, the higher level of criminal activities is based on serious crimes like bank theft, money embezzlement, stealing, over speeding and money scams. Other adult themes are also a part of the shows in which serious kinds of damaging lies, scams, cheating, deceiving, and robbery is included. Dangerous pranks, taking harmful medicines without a proper medical prescription and deadly driving is also shown in the programs. Frequent scenes of abduction and kidnapping also cover a huge part of the shows. Bad table manners, writing on walls, and drooling is also shown in the cartoons.

A great number of male characters were involved in criminal activities like car snatching, kidnapping, over speeding but the most disturbing kind of car speeding was when the characters kept hitting and running over people without any serious consequences shown. The Most horrible kinds of criminal and evil activities were shown in *Uncle Grandpa* carried out by toddlers and young kids. Over speeding by a minor was presented as an exciting activity and many people were run over by the car driven by a non-licensed young girl. Constantly lying and cheating to get whatever the characters desire to achieve is used to accomplish goals. Rash driving and making reckless moves in order to look groovy was also portrayed in the show. Problematic evil activities were pretty high in *Uncle Grandpa*.

Serious kinds of criminal activities were observed in *The Amazing World of Gumball*, Reckless driving, breaking red signals, running over people and over speeding were displayed without any punishment. *Jamie* used blackmail to get what she wanted and tied her rivals with ropes to punish them. Bad table manners and disgusting eating etiquettes were exhibited by the male characters. Characters would burp in a loud tone and eat in a nauseating manner. No table manners were followed, they would make a mess and litter their place instead of keeping it clean. Disobeying parents was one of the common themes explored in problematic attitudes. Mostly characters would disobey the rules of their parents and feel good about it. Uttering bad words about parents is also shown in the cartoons, *Johnny Test* is a character who became so furious, he uttered 'Darn it' in the presence of his mother because she was not letting him attend a dangerous race. *Johnny Test* is a show full of reckless actions and dangerously risky behaviours. The overall impression of the show is that *Johnny*, an ill-mannered, rude and troublesome boy never obeys his parents and his sisters always help to advance his mischievous plans. *Johnny* uses 'Darn it' quite often to show his anger. He is always against the rules of his house and plays risky pranks when he gets bored. *Johnny* as an eleven-year boy is much too spoilt, he never hesitates to use evil methods like cheating, stealing, deceiving and blackmailing to accomplish his goals. *Johnny's* hyperactivity often lands him in great trouble.

In *Gravity Falls*, a few incidents of crimes were presented but they were very mature in their nature. Bribing, stealing, cheating, kidnapping, and vandalism were used to achieve many goals. A number of times puking and burping was shown to the level of inducing nausea. Gambling and



drinking were also shown in some scenes. In Gravity Falls Uncle Stan is the embodiment of evil and does everything against common ethics. He doesn't mind when he cheats, lies deceives, or steals to fulfil his ambitions. He is always up to robbing a tourist off by offering scams in the name of tourist attractions. He earns money through presenting bogus antiques to the tourists. He sees them as walking money bags. He made Dipper a fake wolf boy to get money from them. Uncle Stan gambles a lot to get money during his vacations, he also faked a heart attack to get in front of a cue and also took off his clothes on a live television.

SpongeBob SquarePants is also high on bad manners and disgusting themes. In the 'Jail Break' episode, Plankton decided to break into jail with disgusting Chum Bucket liquid. To prepare the recipe, Plankton used toilet water with a smelly sock, rotten ingredients and nose liquid. Mostly deceiving and cheating was used by girls and the boys were involved in criminal activities like theft, robbery, over speeding, stealing and money embezzlement.

Breadwinners portrayed serious crimes and bad manners in the 'Thug Loaf' episode with depictions of hardcore criminals who love to wreck property, hit people, destroy cars and blackmail people. This episode portrayed people who were drug addicts and prostitutes were standing in the corner of the streets. Bad manners are utterly horrible as kids are being disrespectful to elders, drooling and spitting frequently. Burping, bad table manners and kinky acts are presented in the name of humour. Despite being a helpful character Uncle Grandpa behaves worse than little kids. All kinds of negative values, bad manners and problematic attitudes are presented in a strange and weird manner. Characters are breaking every single law and rule just to amuse themselves and laughing hysterically at every stupid incident. It's very strange in its nature as characters and storylines are frenetic and random.

The Worst kind of toilet humor was presented in the shows which include, vomiting, farting and spitting. The Toots is an episode that contains crude gross toilet humor, Chowder was forced to eat a kind of food which makes him gassy and he invents a new music career where he farts in a Mike and people go crazy. The whole episode was about vomiting, farting and singing through his butt. The most revolting scene is when he sits on his music agent and keep farting in his mouth. Gross toilet humor is used to create fun in the show. Farting, talking about excretory functions and body waste was used terribly. An idea of making diaper bomb and using it to make people faint was pretty disgusting. Words like Scum bag, dumb, monster, lousy, what the..., and idiot were used in the analyzed episodes. Toilet humor is also present in The Amazing World of Gumball, explicit references were made to poop and diapers with farting used to create humor. A Few strong words like boobs, butt, butt out were used.

The 'Toot Toot' episode shows Bessie who farted in class was accused by the jury for carrying out this heinous act. Bessie said she is intolerant to glucose that's why she accidentally farted. The Judge called her stinky bottom and charged her with first-degree flatulence. She pointed out that honeybees don't fart so she was going to take her honor back. The next day newspaper headlines were about Bessie 'she was stripped because she ripped'. Bessie sad it was unintentional, I didn't even feel the knock at the door. Everyone in town was making fun of her even her brother said she slipped the goose. Benjamin said he is always loud and proud and farts many times but Bessie said it's different for girls. Bessie was so upset about her farting that she was feeling lonely. Bessie called the doctor and asked him to help her with her gassy stomach. Bessie was outcast by her friends and school after farting incident but one day she opened her bee badge handbook and found that bees can fart. She and Happy ate too much beans and went into the ground to take part in a fart competition to win the badge. This entire episode is about toilet humor and it discussed farting as a natural process for boys but an act of shame for girls.

### 3. Conclusion

Among many other sociocultural factors, children's ethical development is also dependent upon media as the media has been criticised for lowering the ethical values and causing damage to the morality of children. Children spend a large amount of time on media and have easy access to



explicit content like theft, violence, obscenity, nudity, sexual promiscuity and abusive language (Elliot, 2006). The themes explored in the cartoon shows range from mild to extremely unethical themes and some of them are eye openers for the parents who really think that children cartoon shows are meant for little children and that it's a harmless mode of safe homely entertainment. Serving as a sort of catch-all: this category encompasses crude mannerisms, illegalities, defiance, as well as other forms of social and ethical rebellion. There are an excessive number of instances where scamming, lying, cheating, stealing, and other egregious behaviors have been associated with the possession of a higher intellect: apparently the true test of one's mettle is their capacity for duping others. Harmful pranks have also similarly been elevated to represent a twisted social hierarchy. Circumvention of societal norms and practices are typically depicted as praise-worthy behaviors. Despite poor justifications made by proponents stating that these acts are only depicted for the sake of comedic relief, the fact is that a child does not possess the cognitive awareness to understand that these behaviors are actually problematic.

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