

Children's Perceptions of Gender Images in Indian Television Cartoons

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India is the second largest television market in the world after China and the kids' genre has a high viewership share. However, there is severe dearth of active discussion on the ideology of television content for children. The objective of this study was to mainstream the discussion on the role of television cartoons in perpetuating gender stereotypes in the Indian context. 51 children between 4 to 14 years of age were interviewed on topics including their television viewing habits, description of gender roles portrayed in television cartoons, their attitudes towards gender roles in general among other themes. The responses strongly suggest that children consume highly gender-stereotypic content and that it gets reflected in their perceptions of media content as well as articulations of the world around them. The heterogeneity of the Indian socio-cultural context does not get represented in the dominant media discourse.

Children's television in India

According to the KPMG-FICCI Indian Media & Entertainment Industry Report 2015, India is the second largest television market in the world after China with 168 million television households (p. 6). The same report states that the kids' genre has a viewership share of 7 per cent (p. 22). The number of children's television channels had increased from 10 in 2008 to 22 in 2014 (Jaggi, 2015). Animation is a big draw and the Ernst & Young Report states that the animation genre accounted for 85 per cent of TV Viewership Ratings in 2011 (Box office India, 2012). However, there is severe dearth of active discussion on the ideology of television content for children. Academic spaces in India have been either disinterested or found the topic too trivial for engagement. The author is forced to make this statement as there is almost negligible scholarly attention given

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to this area vis-à-vis the mammoth academic literature available from other countries. Additionally, the Indian television industry apparently is disinterested in engaging in any discussion on this issue. The industry professionals are fascinated by the marketing opportunities provided by this platform. The empowerment of the child audience is more about appreciating her as a consumer than as an active participant who engages with the meanings of this content. Unfortunately, gender does not even figure in any discussions on this subject in the Indian context. In a country, where the sex ratio is 940 females to every 1000 males (Census, 2011), and the reasons for this skewed sex ratio have deep-rooted ideological premise; media's responsibility to mainstream more egalitarian gender images becomes even more critical.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

James & James (2008) state that childhood exists in a social space that is defined by law, politics, religion, culture, social class, gender, ethnicity among other social structures. The fact that a gender and feminist based research study that evaluates the relationship of children with television cartoons was almost missing in the world's youngest nation's academic repository is extremely worrisome. When children live with this content as transmedia from morning to evening, the repercussions of gender portrayals are immense. However, when there is dialogue and discussion, the subject gets mainstreamed. The objective of this study was to mainstream the discussion on the role of television cartoons in perpetuating gender stereotypes in the Indian context.

Why is television still relevant? Lemish (2007) states that despite a huge penetration of the internet and other media technologies; television still dominates the lives of children (p. 5). In her work titled 'Children and Television – A Global Perspective', Lemish (2007) argues that children are active consumers of television who react to, think, feel, create meanings and bring a variety of predispositions, abilities, desires and experiences to television (p. 3). Hence, according to her, it is as important to understand "what do children do with television" as it is to understand "how does television influence children?" (p. 3). Lemish (2007) also states that the theoretical and ideological shift in studying children as research *with* children rather than research *on* children has led to the adoption of a variety of methodologies besides surveys and experiments that include interviews, participant observation and task-based methods like children's drawings and written accounts (p. 7 & 16). This study uses interviews as the primary technique to investigate children's perceptions of gender images on television cartoons.

Drawing from Lemish (2007), the qualitative research inquiry of this study is based on phenomenology. The reception study with children has used the interview technique in combination with detailed conversations, observations and analysis of respondents' personal anecdotes, which Lester (1999) refers to as personal texts. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the concept of social construction of reality

(Berger and Luckman, 1967). This is an interpretative study that explores the idea of understanding rather than the idea of effect.

This study was preceded by a content analysis study (Jaggi, 2016) which examined top animation content according to television ratings data. The ratings data surveyed children between 4 to 14 years of age as its target audience. Therefore this study also considered the same age group as the population to conduct interviews. All the children interviewed for this study were from the city of Pune (metropolitan; IT, automobile & educational hub) in the state of Maharashtra in India. Using the principle of saturation (Mason, 2010), a total of 51 children were interviewed between January 2015 and March 2016. The study ensured that equal number of girls and boys participated in the research study (25 girls and 26 boys) and that children from all age brackets were represented in the sample.

Tobin (2000) states that if a research concerns commonly discussed subjects (like media content), group interviews are more effective than individual interviews. Except for six child respondents, all the other child respondents were interviewed in groups. A total of six individual and seven in-depth group interviews were conducted where group size ranged from four to ten. Even in group interviews, each child respondent was asked every question from the interview guide. The child respondents were asked questions on their television viewing habits, description of gender roles portrayed in television cartoons, their attitudes towards gender roles in general, parental intervention and their family structures among other themes. All the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis of interviews was done to summarize and evaluate the responses.

Analysis of children's responses

The child respondents' average television viewing time ranged from one to three hours on daily basis and increased during vacations. Most of them stated that they used their parents' smartphones and tablets, but television was something that they wanted to go back to when they were bored or needed comfort or wanted to avoid studies. Lemish (2007) refers to television as the 'default' medium which children turn to when they are bored, lonely or even when they just want to get some entertainment (p. 5). Interestingly, some children also said that television helped them explore new things. Another response that emerged was that television gave them content to talk about with friends – the concept of conversational currency articulated by Silverstone (1989).

While most children state that their parents rarely co-view television with them, most of them mention that mothers participate more than fathers. However, this intervention is restricted to controlling the duration of children's television viewing rather than content. If the findings of surveys conducted by media research agencies are referred, the head of Ormax (Indian media research agency) states that 18% of children's television

viewing in India comes from animation content and the rest 82% from general entertainment like television serials, movies and reality shows. We assume that since most Indian homes are still single television households, parents' authority on controlling content gets focused on exclusive children's content like cartoon programming as the rest of the content is viewed by the entire family.

Polarization in preferences

There were certain differences in the choice of favorite shows between boy and girl respondents. While *Power Rangers* was a favourite of most boy respondents, only one girl respondent out of a total of 25 stated that she liked it. Even for an action-packed show like *Pokémon*, which was mentioned as a favorite by most boys, only three girl respondents expressed positive association. None of the boy respondents out of 26 in the sample mentioned *Barbie* as a favourite. A clear polarization of choices in terms of gender was observed. On probing why, for example, the boys showed aversion to *Barbie*, responses like "Yuck", "it's so girly", "I hate Barbie and Tinkerbell" were recorded.

The child respondents in the sample used words like – adventurous, imaginative, funny, interesting, do new things, use gadgets – to explain why they liked particular cartoon shows or characters. The young boys used several words/phrases to rationalize their choice. For example, 10-year old Yajan (male) stated, "I love the fighting in Power Rangers SPD. Even the graphics are very nice". Another 10-year old male respondent, Kartik, while explaining his fascination for *Power Rangers* said, "I love the wars. They rescue the earth and people". In fact, when asked whether they prefer talk or action, all the boy respondents said action and most girl respondents said talk. While four girls said that they liked *Pokémon*, three of them said that they found the story interesting. Only one of the girls said that she liked the fighting scenes. Gender thus emerged as a significant factor that decided the choice and reasons for children's programming preferences.

These findings are in alignment with research findings from other countries, a specific case in point being Lemish & Götz's (2012) study conducted across 24 countries which illustrated how gender stereotypes are constructed and pushed to children. The content analysis study done by the same author (Jaggi, 2016) found that the ratio of male and female characters on Indian television cartoon shows is 3:1 (approximately). This finding is in concurrence with the findings of many research studies from the Western context that concluded that male characters outnumbered female characters in children's television programming (Browne, 1998; Götz, Hoffman & Brosius, 2008; Hust & Brown, 2008; Leaper et al, 2002; Smith & Cook, 2008; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995).

Gender characteristics

When the child respondents were asked to comment on the number of male and female characters in television cartoon programming, all of them across all age groups stated

that there were more boys than girls. The author observed that the children did not feel any discomfort with this imbalanced ratio. The responses came so naturally and casually indicating a thorough mainstreaming and normalizing of this disparity.

When the children were asked to identify the characteristics of male and female cartoon characters on television, the following responses emerged (Table 1):

Table 1. Gender characteristics in cartoons

Male cartoon characters	Female cartoon characters
Physically strong	Caring and affectionate
Sporty and athletic	Boring
Very good in studies	Beautiful
Express anger and fight	Take long to dress up, have a variety of dresses, wear make-up
Brave	Some are strong but always second to boy characters
Funny	Worried about their looks
Crack jokes	Try to impress boys
Professional	Domestic
Brag and bully	Help the main character
Independent	Well-behaved
Very few dependent on others	Need help
Do not cry (only one male cartoon character was identified with crying by all respondents)	Cry and express disappointment
Earn Money	Take care of the house and children

Female respondents described female characters as sensitive, caring, well-behaved, cute and beautiful, helpful, need to be rescued, boring and not funny, and also as getting angry with boys. The male respondents described the female cartoon characters as boring and prone to crying. Most male respondents in the sample were observed to be struggling to find adjectives for female characters. However when it came to describing male cartoon characters, the male respondents used words like funny, strong, intelligent, powerful, problem solvers and aggressive. The girl respondents described the male cartoon characters as strong, intelligent, saviors, fighters, powerful, funny and problem solvers.

While male cartoon characters enjoyed immense popularity among the young respondents (both boys and girls), the female cartoon characters seemed to enthrall only female respondents. The aversion and disinterest expressed by boys while describing female characters indicates the severe lacunae of content that has failed to mainstream and popularize female cartoon characters. What clearly emerged was a prejudice that girls' stories were less important than boys' stories, especially for the young male audience.

However, when the children were asked to describe the behaviour-related attributes of girls and boys in real life, conflicting discourses emerged. The following characteristics were described by the respondents (Table 2):

Table 2. Gender characteristics in real life

Masculine Characteristics	Feminine Characteristics
Strong	Beautiful , like to put make-up
Funny	Talkative
Not very emotional	Cry a lot
Professionals, earn money	Obedient and well-behaved
Good in sports and academics	Studious
Like to sing and dance	Like to sing and dance
Boys ride bikes	Girls don't ride bikes

If this list is compared to the one used to describe male and female cartoon characters, there seems to be a direct impact. Research has demonstrated that higher exposure to stereotyped content on television cartoons leads to stereotyped perceptions of gender roles in real life (Lemish, 2010). This assumption also found resonance in some of the children's responses. For instance, eight-year-old Prakahar (boy) said, "Girls always have long hair as girls with short hair do not look beautiful and that boys shouldn't cry because they are powerful. 12-year-old Rati (girl) stated, "Girls know how to look after children. Boys can have all the fun, but girls have to be in limits. They can have fun but not like boys. They can only do it at home or at a secretive place, not in open like boys". Another common phrase that was repeated by many child respondents was 'boys don't cry'. Younger respondents, four to five-year-old especially, gave a yes in unison when asked if boys could ride bikes, but when asked if girls could also ride bikes shouted no in unison again. Children seemed to remember gender-related information from television cartoons and used a lot of masculine pronouns while talking. There were also certain responses which started with 'should' when the children in the sample discussed gender-specific behaviours. Nine-year-old male respondent Siddhant said, "There is a very sensitive boy in my school. He is very fat, and also has muscular strength. But he hardly uses it and cries a lot. He should use his power and beat others". When a ten-year-old male respondent Satwik said, "How will boys run fast if they wear skirts", or a ten-year-old female respondent Rashi said, "There is no Spiderwoman as girls are scared of insects", the line between gender portrayals in the media content they were exposed to and their gender schema to understand the real world around them seemed to blur.

However, there were several ambivalent viewpoints that emerged as responses to the same questions. When a 10-year young male respondent Sohom said, "I have seen that girls can do many things in real life. It's the directors and producers who think that boys can do more than girls", the discourse got more nuanced. What Sohom articulated

was mentioned by several child respondents, especially when they were probed on the differences that they cited in real-life gender behaviours vis-à-vis the gender representations in cartoon shows. On similar lines, a 13-year-old male respondent for the study, Abhir stated that he had often been teased by his own classmates for having a girl-like voice but he did not care about it as it did not change who he was as person. Abhir also resisted questions on social expectations of gender and said, "Just because my face looks like a boy I don't have to be strong. I think I am weaker than half of the girls in my class. That doesn't make me a girl". However when the researcher probed him on whether he liked to watch cartoon programming like *Barbie*, he said, "I was forced to watch Barbie films with my sister. I was horrified. My favourite cartoon is 'The Lion King' as it isn't about plastic people, complaining about their life and wanting a boyfriend. People say that if you watch Barbie, then you are a girl. If you watch Power Rangers, then you are a boy. It's stuck in our minds probably. It's not true, it's discrimination". This statement from the young respondent sums up the conflict that young child audiences deal with. Children acknowledge both gender equality and gender differences. While both boys and girls prefer specific kinds of programming, they express disappointment with linear and restricted portrayals of gender. They indicated that the story is of greater consequence than the sex of the character. Since girls' stories, in particular, follow very one-dimensional plots, most male respondents expressed aversion to them. For example, nine-year-old Siddhant says, "I have never watched a Barbie film. My full brain and heart says that. Even if I have nothing else to watch, I won't watch it".

Acceptance of gender-roles among children

Television's role in children's everyday life is complex. It is an important socializing agent but this relationship is mediated by family, peers and schools. In terms of the roles that both parents should assume, the responses were usually based on the respondents' personal experiences. In case of children with working mothers, there was a greater openness in terms of distribution of household chores. These respondents were very clear about the distinction between what mothers and fathers did on cartoon shows as compared to what they did in real lives. However, in case of children with stay-at-home mothers, there was a clear alignment to statements like 'moms should stay at home and dads should go to work' or 'moms should cook' or 'dads earn more money than moms'.

Peer influence emerged as another significant factor. During group interviews, the child respondents seemed to be changing certain responses depending on the reaction of their group. In one situation where all the six respondents were boys, when 10-year-old Sohom said, "Sometimes I like to watch Barbie movies", there was a *boo* from the entire group. This forced him to change his response from "sometimes" to "rarely" and then "only when I was little". Non-conformity to expectations of gender roles is an expression of the individual agency of the child. But in the Indian society, where peer groups are highly gendered, the expression of this non-conformity may be a difficult path to tread

for children. As children negotiate with meanings, it is important to understand that they reconfigure their meaning-making process with what Hall (1980) refers to as 'most accepted knowledge' or 'taken for granted notions'. Children modified their responses on the basis of what made them popular and acceptable among peers, and gendered behaviour scored very high on this approval matrix.

When the author proposed the idea of gender-role swapping of their favourite cartoon characters, the female respondents expressed greater acceptability than males. Most boys stated that they would never watch their favorite cartoon show again if it became a girl. While some female respondents expressed excitement about the idea, others were resistant. When probed further, responses like 'girls are not funny', 'girls are not adventurous' and 'boys will look like transgenders if they become girls' were articulated. While sex-category swapping of cartoon characters was met with huge resistance, responses were more ambivalent when it came to discuss the same situation in real life. 10-year-old Kartik, a male respondent stated, "I will feel yucky when I think that my friend will put lipstick; I will hit him. Boys should never behave like girls". However 13-year-old male respondent Abhir gave a completely opposite response, "If my best friend decided to dress up like a girl, I will say wait up bro, I am coming!" 12-year-old Rati, a female respondent, said, "It will be fun if girls can be like boys. But if a boy wears a princess' dress or high-heeled shoes, it doesn't happen. But girls can wear anything". The deeper the author interrogated the child respondents on this question, more prejudices emerged. Homophobic references were common. In case there were more accommodative responses, on further probing it emerged that age, parental intervention and being part of less-gendered peer groups mitigated polarized ideas on gender roles to some extent. So while with age the knowledge about gender stereotypes deepened, the idea of adherence to stereotypes appeared to be more flexible. Girls seemed to be more open to viewing more male characters and even experimenting with the idea of gender swapping, especially of girls to boys. However the boys interviewed as part of the sample seemed less open to the idea of gender swapping of either cartoon characters or real people, especially males becoming females. This perspective also featured in terms of choice of cartoon programming. The girls interviewed in this study had no qualms in naming television cartoons with male characters as their favourite. However, most boy respondents said that they had never watched a cartoon programme with female characters and some went to the extent of saying that it was impossible for boys to do so. 11-year-old Rhea summed up this dichotomy by saying, "If I tell my friends that I watch cartoons that have boys in them, they will say I am cool. But if I a boy would say that he watches girls' cartoons, his friends would call him gay".

There were clear differences in the responses when they spelled out their professional ambitions. The following is the list of professions stated by the 26 male respondents – soldier, army officer, police officer, WWE wrestler, doctor. The following is the list of professions stated by the 25 female respondents – doctor, engineer, teacher, artist, radio jockey, dancer, athlete, and in one case, police officer. However, what was interesting

to observe was that not more than four children in the entire sample could even reconcile with the image of a male nurse (the others hadn't even heard of one), a finding coinciding with an earlier research study done by Wright et al (1995) in the American context. There was a direct relationship between these responses and children's recall of professional status of their favourite television characters. Additionally, the professional standing of the respondents' parents was an influential factor. Younger children were more emphatic in their responses about mothers staying at home and cooking, and fathers going to office and earning money. In cases, where the child respondents discussed their mothers' professions, they opined that mothers earned less money than fathers.

Conclusion

The preceding section summarizes how children negotiate with the construction of their gender identity with television content. The responses strongly suggest that children consume highly gender-stereotypic content and that it gets reflected in their perceptions of media content as well as articulations of the world around them. Indian society is varied and complex. The heterogeneity of the Indian socio-cultural context does not get represented in the dominant media discourse, which is mostly lop-sided and standardized. When this standardization gets extended to media content for children, its repercussions can be detrimental and irreversible. Since 60% of content of children's television in India is imported, it is not surprising that these findings resonate with the findings from research studies conducted in other parts of the world. The problem is that even the 40% indigenous content does not offer any alternative possibilities to the young viewers as masculine mythological themes drive it. In the Indian context, where peer groups are highly gendered, children's agency to accept non-traditional gender behaviours gets snubbed very often. Hence the need for gender-neutral and non-stereotypical television content is even more crucial. Despite the presence of an equal number of women professionals in the media industry, transformation of television content is not even a talking point in the Indian television fraternity. However, there are some optimistic revelations. Children question media representations and subtly accuse the media of manipulation. There are some non-stereotypical images perpetuated by the media, but they are so few and secondary that they do not garner enough attention. Alternative platforms like digitization, critical media literacy and a regulatory framework could be some possible ways to initiate the process of transformation of gender portrayals on children's television in India. But it has to begin with an acknowledgement of the disparity. While collaborative engagement between the media industry and academia could be one way forward; it is important that Indian researchers collaborate with their global counterparts to strengthen the discourse on this crucial subject. This is the least we could do for creating plural and diverse social spaces for our children.

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