



Internalizing Gendered Identities: An Analysis of Children's Conversations about Cartoon Characters

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital world, children spend most of their time watching and enjoying cartoons on smart devices. We, therefore, argue that cartoons leave an impact on the identity of children. This research explores how children accumulate gender stereotypes using Bandura's social learning theory (1977) and identification with media characters' theory by Cohen (2001). The study investigates how children of 3rd to 5th grade construct identity under the influence of popular cartoon characters. Based on the child-centred methodology, including controlled conversation patterns with children from ten private schools of Islamabad, this study gives children a voice in exploring their gendered identities. Findings suggest that boys are inclined to save and rescue, show power, desire knighthood, and admire the stout and muscular body of male cartoon characters while girls are fascinated by submissiveness and politeness, beauty, and the ideal physique of female characters. The findings, further, suggest that boys follow the stereotypes; however, in certain instances, girls try to break the traditional stereotypes and express their desire to be independent and powerful. Hence, children in the form of these traits internalize gender stereotypes. This study is significant as it sheds light on how this popular medium inculcates gendered stereotypes in children's minds shapes their personas and how much they value them.

Keywords: Child's Identity, Cartoons, Gender Stereotypes, Social Learning Theory, Identification with Media Characters

INTRODUCTION

Children traditionally undergo learning abstract ideas like gender roles, the conception of good and bad, lifestyle, and particular behaviour through fantasy (Fischer, 2010). They often have difficulty differentiating fantasy from reality. Specifically susceptible to the portrayals of characters on television, especially with the aid of cartoons; and it occurs between the age of two to eleven (Eick, 1998). They are influenced by peers, parents, individuals, and the media, Katz and Boswell (1986) argued that both peers and media are more effective than parents in a child's gender development. Children identify themselves with their favourite cartoon characters and tend to assume their traits, goals, and attitudes (Cohen, 2001). Moreover, this imagination leads children to adopt the traits, goals, and perspectives of the cartoon character whom they identify with (Cohen, 2001). They start visualizing their own lives in those cartoon



characters and start absorbing their traits, goals, and perceptions (Cohen, 2001). Furthermore, Cohen (2001) positions that “in terms of age, it is generally assumed that children identify more strongly and are more influenced than adults by television role models” (p.311). Bandura (1977) also states that children can best learn from televised models. Children are left in front of televisions and laptops with access to a myriad of cartoon channels, animated movies and so on. Furthermore, the media not only informs people about the different situations and events happening in the world but also shares old myths, cultural and folk tales, and stereotypes with the people (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006). Content on television is stereotypical. Thompson and Zebrinos (1995) have analyzed different cartoons that show large discrepancies between prominence and portrayal of male and female characters. They have noted that males have been given much more prominence in the cartoons. Media can cause deleterious effects on children without adult supervision. Therefore, I argue that cartoon characters might have a deep impact on the identity of children. It might force children to internalize gender stereotypes from cartoons.

On average, a North American 10-year-old kid watches 28 hours of television per week (Thompson & Zebrinos, 1997). The experience of watching cartoons is not equally divided between boys and girls (Thompson & Zebrinos, 1997). This unequal distribution of watching cartoons is because of the stereotypical gender roles which the favorite cartoon characters transmit in children according to gender (Costa, 2016). The average of watching television among Pakistani children is almost the same, as a school going child of 3 or 4 standards is also watching television at least 3 or 4 hours daily and on holidays for 6 to 8 hours (Yousaf, Shehzad & Hassan, 2015). The content is the same as being transmitted in America, Britain, or India (Thompson & Zebrinos, 1995). There are very few entertainment programs being produced for kids in Pakistan and the ones being produced are unpopular and inappropriately marketed (Thompson & Zebrinos, 1995). Cohen (2001) describes cartoons as not only a source of entertainment but also an indoctrinating tool that inculcates various social norms and beliefs in the mind of children. Arnett (2007) posits that “media presents a public’s view of teenagers which means how a person should be and also according to teenager’s views of themselves” (p.5). Therefore, children's perceptions are shaped in the same way as represented in the cartoons. The representation of reality in the cartoons is the gendered behaviour of boys and girls (Fischer, 2010). The inculcation of gendered behaviour foregrounds gender inequalities in



society. Therefore, we presume that a child's personality and behaviour are affected by the media, especially cartoons. This impact predictably shapes their identities.

Children absorb traits and attitudes from the content they watch as they spend their leisure time in front of the TV or the internet (Katz & Boswell, 1986). The available content of cartoon films and TV episodes contains fairy tales, supernatural characters and science fiction (Fischer, 2010). The underlying structure of these animated films is monotonous and contains notable elements: the idealistic representation of characters, glamorized lifestyle and specific sets of habits that exemplify stereotypical gender roles. These cartoon characters may leave a long-lasting impact on children's minds and may influence their perceptions of the real world negatively. Young children start to categorize themselves according to the parameters of social preferences. They try to absorb the attitudes and perceptions of characters while watching movies. The content of cartoons may invoke the children to internalize traits, attitudes and perceptions of these characters within themselves too. Therefore, this study tries to investigate the impact of these cartoon characters on young children. Moreover, it tends to highlight the influence of cartoons in acquiring gendered stereotypes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Stereotypes in Popular Mass Media

In the antiquity of media, gender has been represented stereotypically over a prolonged duration of time (Ahmed & Wahab, 2001). Various parameters such as appearance, behaviour, gender roles, masculinity, and femininity have been used to show the preconceived notions of gender in media (Wiersma, 2000; Essig, 2018). Media is marked with a high level of appearance-related messages (Harriger, Serier, Luedke, Robertson, & Bojorquez, 2018). The appearance of females and males are labelled in the media by traditional stereotypes such as men's bodybuilding as well as women's beauty and smart figure (Signorielli, 1997, 2001; Klein & Shiffman, 2006). Besides, the most prominent factors are hair and clothes and girls try to imitate the modelled characters (Abi-khalil & Mady 2016). Therefore, children might learn that women's beauty and smart figures are important for women's acceptance in society which in turn casts an impact on their identity.

Behavioral stereotyping is also found in mass media. Hoffner (1996) has observed a fact that character's traits attract children and reflect expectations for males and females. Also, Ahmed and Wahab (2001) have analyzed cartoons' episodes and showed that male characters are more rough, sloppy, aggressive, strong, powerful, and dominating. Whereas, female



characters have been represented as timid, submissive, polite, and unintelligent (Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, and Perlman, 2002). This might influence a child's mind negatively. These representations of cartoon characters similarly strengthen a child's mind. England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (2011) have conveyed that the content in Disney princesses cartoon movies is replete with traditionally masculine characteristics and traditionally feminine characteristics. Furthermore, media is also rife with gender role's stereotyping where females are limited to only a few roles contrary to males (Baker & Raney, 2007) who have a wide array of roles to choose from. Media moulds the ways of thinking of children regarding gender roles (Calvert, 1999) which may later affect the socialization process of children. Females are mostly portrayed in household roles and restricted to some fewer occupational roles and lead roles, such as nurses, teachers, and office secretaries, were not active enough, and hold lesser positions of responsibility (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Malhotra, 2012; Durkin & Nugent, 1998). Moreover, it is depicted in cartoons that women have a lower status in society than men. Men have been represented as heroes, problem solvers, and privileged and having a prominent position and high status in society (Wiersma, 2000; Ahmed & Wahab, 2001; Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002). This might influence the thinking patterns of a child. Children may notice these discrepancies of male and female characters' roles and absorb them.

Impact of Cartoons on the Behavior and Mind of Children

Studies have reported the impact of cartoons on the behaviour and attitudes of children. "Social networks spread and support the diffusion of new behavioural patterns" (Abi-khalil & Mady 2016, p.86), it persuades its audience to gather information about the new behavioural pattern and then internalize it. Such as, aggressive cartoons have increased aggressive behaviour in children, children may learn violent behaviours from a cartoon because of the similarity of cartoon characters (Hapkiewicz, 1979; Ergun, 2012; Heilman, 2012; Kirsh, 2006.). As children learn violent behaviours from cartoons, they might absorb gender stereotypes in themselves.

Knowles and Nixon (1990) have investigated children's understanding of complex emotions such as jealousy represented in cartoons. Furthermore, Morison and Gardner (1978) have experimented on preschool children to know the capacity of children to differentiate between fantasy and reality. Morison and Gardner (1978) state that children are obsessed with fantasy and explicit information is required to brief the children on the differentiation between



fantasy and reality. We, therefore, argue that children might internalize gender stereotypes from the cartoon characters. As they could not differentiate between fantasy and reality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is embedded in the theory of “identification with media characters” presented by Cohen (2001). Identification is a perceived association between characters and their spectators (Cohen, 2001). According to Cohen (2001), one can hardly imagine any media text having any impact without identification”. Identification with media character theory has both “affective (empathy) and cognitive (understanding goals and motives, perspective-taking) components” (Cohen, 2001, p.302). Cohen (2001) has devised four dimensions of identification theory based on which one can have a deep influence on these media texts. These four dimensions are mentioned below:

Empathy or Sharing the Feelings of the Character

In this dimension of identification, children tend to share the feeling of the character. Children start being happy or sad with the character (Cohen, 2001).

Cognition or Sharing the Perspective of the Character

This dimension involves a cognitive aspect, and children are inclined to share the perspectives of the character (Cohen, 2001). Cohen (2001) states that “Operationally this can be measured by the degree to which an audience member feels he or she understands the character and the motivations for his or her behaviour” (p.312).

Internalize and Share the Goals or Traits of the Character

Children start to internalize the traits, motives, goals, and perspectives of their identified character (Cohen, 2001). As Cohen (2001) states that this step is motivation. Children develop motivation through their involvement with the cartoon character to internalize their traits, motives, goals, and perspectives (Cohen, 2001).

Absorption

It is the last dimension of the identification process in which children truly absorb the traits, motives, goals, and so on of their identified cartoon character (Cohen, 2001). The theory of identification helps analyze the conversation data of children because Cohen (2001) positions that “in terms of age, it is generally assumed that children identify more strongly and are more influenced than adults by television role models” (p.311).

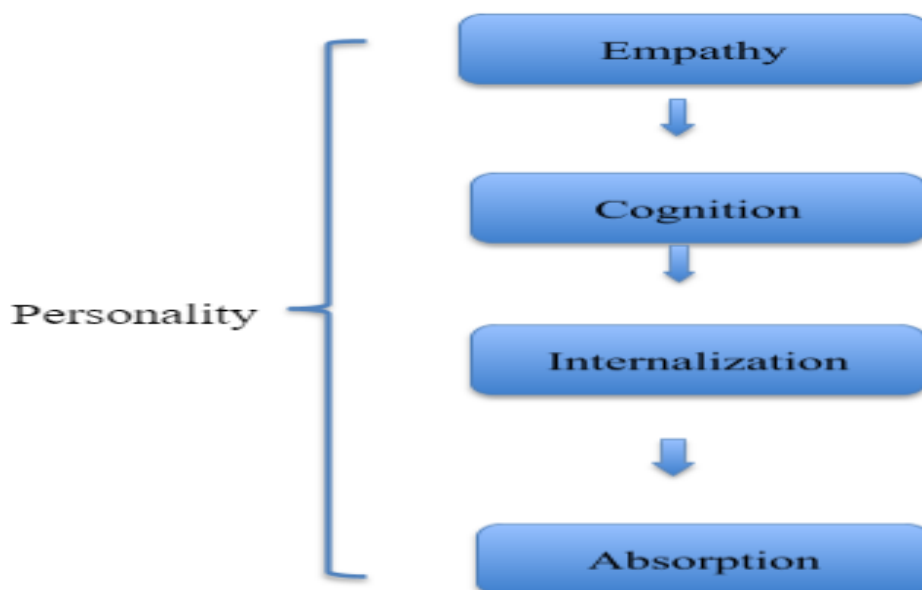


Figure 1: Identification with media character: Adapted from Cohen (2001).

The above-mentioned figure illustrates that children first develop a sense of empathy with their favourite cartoon character later it takes the shape of cognition then it leads to internalization which results in the absorption of the desired traits of their favourite character. After passing through these four steps a child's identity changes to some extent.

Social Learning Theory

The researcher has used social learning as an analytical framework. Based on the model presented by Horsburgh and Ippolito (2018). Horsburgh and Ippolito (2018) have used all the categories of Bandura's theory (1977) to draw themes. We have used only one category (Attention process) to draw themes. Social learning theory involves sub-processes that help children to learn and adapt to the behaviors of others well (Bandura, 1977). These steps are: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. The attention process allows children to choose the most relevant part of the model's numerous characteristics (Bandura, 1977). Another distinctive feature of social learning theory is retention process which states that children cannot learn the behaviour if they have no memory of it (Bandura, 1977). The reproduction process can be stated as the ability of children to produce the desired behaviour of the model (Bandura, 1977). The motivation process can be stated as a person's motivation to enact or imitate the behaviour they have observed. The impact of cartoon characters in the accumulation of gender stereotypes is less explored, therefore, we pose the query of:

- What is the impact of the cartoon characters on children's identity?



- What kind of gender stereotypes becomes part of child identity through identification with media characters?

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative. Creswell (2009) defines Qualitative study as grounded in the interpretive position because it is concerned with how a phenomenon of interest is interpreted and understood. Moreover, this study is embedded in the interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interpretive paradigm is based on the notion that reality is not objective rather subjective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Population and Sample

The students at private schools in Islamabad comprise the population of this study. The researcher has preferred to take students from private schools because students of private schools have the same social background. The sample consists of students aged 6 to 12 of the selected ten private schools of Islamabad. Moreover, each conversation has 8 to 10 students. This study follows a purposive as well as convenient sampling technique.

Data Collection Technique

We have recorded children's conversations in a controlled environment to keep the conversation directed to the topic of the study. For the collection of data, the researcher has created a list of topics and themes such as the physical appearance of cartoon characters, behavioural traits, and gender roles. The researcher has given a brief idea to the teachers about how the teachers must lead the conversation based on the given topic and themes. Based on the techniques of purposive as well as convenient sampling the researcher has chosen between 5 and 10 students from 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade for each conversation session. A total of patterns in 50 conversations were recorded. The researcher has recorded audios only to keep the anonymity of the participants as well as ensure protecting the rights of children and complying with another ethical consideration. These conversations have enabled the researchers to note the most frequently watched cartoon to see the similarity in the talk of children as well as cartoon content. Conclusively, the transcribed conversations have been thematically analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic Analysis of the Conversations

Initially, we have derived themes from the conversations by using one category (attention process) of Bandura's theory of social learning (1977). The following themes emerged from the conversations:

- (a) Power and authority



- (b) Submissiveness and politeness
- (c) Desire for knighthood
- (d) Desire for beauty
- (e) Desire to save and rescue
- (f) Desire to be independent.

This section discusses these themes in further detail by using a theory of identification with media characters (Cohen, 2001) to see the impact of cartoon characters on children's personalities and how they internalize gender stereotypes under this influence. This portion of the analysis uses all four categories: empathy, cognition, internalization, and absorption to unearth the impact of cartoons in children's conversation.

Power and Authority

Fascination with power is the prevalent theme in the conversations of teachers and students. This theme has repeatedly occurred in the conversation of boys because they yearn for power and strength more when compared with girls' responses. Cohen (2001) implies that children undergo the characteristics of their favourite cartoon character after passing through four steps of the identification process i.e. empathy, cognition, internalization and absorption.

Empathy is the first step in which children assume themselves as cartoon characters and sharing similar feelings with their favourite cartoon character leads children to cognitively process their traits and perspectives. The boy identifies and empathizes with Batman. He responds that he starts to feel sad when Batman is beaten up by another person such as:

Teacher: What do you feel when Batman is beaten up by another person?

Boy 1: Sad! And when he shows power, I feel super happy! (conversation, 02)

The boy here seems to empathize with the cartoon characters which means that he is indulged in an identification process. This makes them experience the world through their favourite character's perspectives and goals. Children start to think about the perspectives and traits of their identified character (Cohen, 2001). Hence, the boy starts to think deeply about the traits and perspectives of Batman and after analyzing he came to know that Batman's perspective is to have powers in order to save the world. Therefore, the boy seems to encourage the perspective of Batman as he posits that he likes the power and strength of Batman. The boy is cognitively motivating Batman's perspective of having powers and strength and fighting which leads the boys towards the third step that is "internalization".

Teacher: Why do you like Batman?



Boy 1: Because he is strong and powerful and fights with his enemies

Teacher: You like his powers and strength?

Boy 1: Yes (conversation, 02)

The third step is internalization, in which children develop a sense of motivation in themselves which leads them to internalize the goals of their favourite cartoon characters (Cohen, 2001). Therefore, the boy starts to internalize the goals of Batman. Upon asking the boy responds “yes” that he is attracted towards his powers. As mentioned in the lines below:

Teacher: So, you are attracted to Batman because of his strength and powers?

Boy 1: Yes, I like the way he fights. (conversation, 02)

This shows the degree to which the child understands the characteristics of his favourite character. In this step, absorption the boy starts to lose his self-awareness to some degree and starts to accumulate the desired part of the identity of his favourite character (Cohen, 2001). The boy seems to be involved with the character to some degree as he endorses the powers of Batman. His identity is shaped in a way that he thinks power is important for a boy like him.

Teacher: What do you like about these characters?

Boy 1: Their power and fight and fun.

Teacher: Do you also want to be powerful and have the strength?

Boy 1: Yes (conversation, 02)

The above-mentioned example shows that cartoon characters create a desire for power and authority in boys. Whereas some girls also absorb the desire of having power and strength, like some girls identify themselves with female cartoon characters who have powers such as Elsa, Wonder woman, and power-puff girls.

Submissiveness and Politeness

In all the excerpts of the conversation, girls seem to be absorbing the polite and submissive nature of female cartoon characters such as Barbie, Cinderella, and so on. One of the girls dictates that she feels sad when Cinderella is sad. Thereby, this feeling leads her to absorb more of the traits and goals of Cinderella (Cohen, 2001). Sharing similar feelings indulge them in the first step of identification through empathy.

Teacher: Okay tell me, what do you feel when Cinderella is sad and beaten up by her stepsisters or do you feel happy?

Girl 1: I don't like it. I don't like her grandmother. (conversation, 02)



Children cognitively process the traits and perspectives of their favourite character and then start to internalize and absorb those traits (Cohen, 2001). They understand that Cinderella's goals are to be polite. Thereby, this much absorption in that character likely casts an impact. So, it motivates their behaviour as a girl replied:

Teacher: What are the goals and perspectives of Cinderella in the cartoon?
(conversation, 02)

Girl 1: She is kind and polite to everyone

Girls have been cognitively processing the submissiveness and polite behaviour of their favourite cartoon characters. In internalization, Children start to internalize the traits and perspectives of their favourite character (Cohen, 2001). As positioned by Cohen (2001) children cultivate a sense of motivation in themselves for internalization of their traits. For example:

Teacher: Tell me something about the behaviour of Cinderella? What kind of behaviour does she show? (conversation, 02)

Girl 1: Cinderella's behaviour is very kind and polite behaviour and she is a very kind person.

Teacher: Tell me any incident in the cartoon that you like the most?

Girl 4: When she is very kind and sincere with her sisters

In the fourth step (absorption) children completely absorb the traits and perceptions of their identified character (Cohen, 2001). Similarly, the girl tends to make these traits partially as part of her identity. As evident from her reply:

Teacher: Do you want to adopt her polite behaviour? (conversation, 02)

Girl 1: Yes, I want to adopt

Girls absorb the submissive and polite nature in their personality but there are many instances where girls identify themselves with confident female cartoon characters.

The Desire for Knighthood

Boys talk about the desire to be knighted as the fighting scenes and fighting actions attract them when they watch cartoons. The children tend to experience everything through the lens of their favourite cartoon characters by sharing similar feelings which fall under empathy. Under the influence of the cartoon characters, a boy explicates that he feels happy when Captain America fights. It points towards the fact that the boys have developed a sense of empathy with Captain America. For example, he states that he feels happy when he fights.



Teacher: How do you feel when Captain America wins? (conversation, 06)

Boy 4: I feel happy.

Teacher: Do you also feel happy when he fights?

Boy 4: Yes, sure. I like all the fighting scenes. I watch them again and again.

After developing a sense of empathy children cognitively process the perspectives of the knighthood of their favourite cartoon characters. A boy seems to be indulged in a cognitive process with the character of Captain America. He seems to motivate his behaviour of keeping shields as he mentions that he likes "his shield", which entails that he incorporates the traits of Captain America. Cohen, (2001) also propounds that cognition involves perspective sharing and also involves motivation for the behaviour of their favourite cartoon characters. . As mentioned in the lines below:

Teacher: Which one is your favourite character?

Boy 4: Captain America

Teacher: Do you like the way he dresses up? Or the way he walks or talks?

Boy 4: I like his shield, his strength and his powers (conversation, 06)

In the third step, Children develop a sense of motivation through their involvement with the cartoon character to internalize their goals and perspectives (Cohen, 2001). Similarly, the boy internalizes the goals of Captain America. He mentions that he likes stunts and fights. Which entails that he pays attention to his goals of fighting. As the boy describes:

Teacher: What do you like the most in Captain America?

Boy 10: I like the stunts

Teacher: Stunts, you mean action and fight. (Conversation, 06)

The boy loses his self-awareness and seems to absorb part of the identity of his favourite cartoon character:

Teacher: So, you are going to have that shield and power with you?

Boy 8: Yes (conversation, 36)

The boy desires to have the traits of knighthood in themselves. A shield, metal cloth, and fighting attract them in their favourite cartoon characters.

The Desire for Beauty

Under the influence of this theme, girls identify themselves with Cinderella, Barbie, Snow-White, Rapunzel etc because girls have been shown as more concerned with beauty than



boys. In the conversations, a girl shares feelings of empathy with the character of Elsa. Cohen (2001) explains that empathy is the first step that entails a girl's interest in her identified character. She expressed that she feels happy while seeing Elsa as smart. As presented in the data;

Teacher: What do you feel when you see Elsa?

Girl 5: I like her. She is smart and beautiful and elegant. (conversation, 48)

So, this empathic feeling implies a girl's absorption in the character of Elsa and this leads to cognition. Cohen (2001) implies that in cognition, children probe deeper into the perspectives of cartoon characters. This thinking develops a sense of understanding and motivation about the traits and perspectives of the identified cartoon character (Cohen, 2001). She motives those traits in Elsa in which somehow beauty is involved. It also implies that she shares the perspective of looking beautiful. As presented in the data:

Teacher: Do you like the [colour of the dress or the way it is made?

Girl: Yeah, I like the colour absolutely, the way it is made to the ground, I love it. (conversation, 08)

She seemed to motivate the things in which she looks beautiful which leads to internalization. Internalization develops a sense of motivation in children. Cohen (2001) implies that this motivation causes them to internalize their desired traits.

The girl that empathizes with the character of Elsa, appears to internalize the beauty traits of her favourite character. As beauty and beauty, related things attract her more than any other thing such as power. This internalization is creating an urge or desire for beauty traits in herself. She wants to adopt that trait so that it can become a part of her identity as well.

Teacher: Which cartoon character do you like?

Girl 10: I like Elsa

Teacher: What do you like the most about her appearance?

Girl 10: Her dress and I love that she is smart

Teacher: Do you want to wear that dress too?

Girl 10: Yes. (conversation, 38)

So, girls seem to internalize the goals of beauty she propounded the desire to have beauty in her personality. This is already a perceived stereotype that girls are always associated with beauty. Absorption is the final stage in which children lose their identity and take up the



desired parts of their identified character's identity (Cohen, 2001). Similarly, a girl seems to absorb the traits of Elsa, and the girl absorbs those traits to which the girl is more involved such as the beauty of Elsa. The absorption of the beauty traits by the girl is shown in the lines mentioned below:

Teacher: What do you like the most in Elsa?

Girl: I want to wear that dress and want to look beautiful like her. I have an Elsa dress too, ma'am. (conversation, 38)

In most of the conversations (like 1, 10, 15 etc.) girls desire to be beautiful over powerful but a few instances have been found in which girls yearn to have powers. Here, the girls are breaking stereotypes which means that they are not following the old tradition of being beautiful.

Desire to Save and Rescue

A recurring theme in which boys identify with male characters leads them to admire their traits of rescuing others. Cohen (2001) implies empathy (sharing the feelings) is the initial step towards the identification process. So, the boy seems to indulge with the male cartoon character as he feels empathetic with the character of Big Hero. The boy feels sad with the character of Big Hero when he loses his powers. For instance:

Teacher: What do you feel when a big hero is sad and loses any fight or his powers?

Boy3: Yes, I feel sad and very bad about it. I want him to get back all his powers. (conversation, 16)

In cognition (the second step) children tend to think about their perspectives and cognitively process their motives and perspectives (Cohen, 2001). The boy's understanding further directs him to cognitively endorse the character of Big Hero. The boy conveys that he motivates his behaviour of rescuing others too, which means that he is encouraging as well as sharing the rescuing nature of his favourite character Big Hero. As presented in the data:

Boy 1: His behaviour, the way he saves and fights with the bad guy. (Conversation,16)

In this step, children develop motivation in themselves to internalize the rescuing traits and activities of their favourite cartoon characters. He starts to internalize and merge his identity with the part of the identity of Big Hero. As he mentions that he wants to rescue his family members if the world would be in trouble. So, he seems to make these traits part of his identity too.



Boy 1: He fought against bad people and rescued good people.

Teacher: Okay do you like this power of Big Hero that he rescues others and save others from bad people

Boy 1: Yes, of course. (conversation, 16)

Internalization leaned him to the last step of the identification process in which they have started to lose their self-awareness to some degree. It is the last dimension of the identification process in which children absorb the traits and goals of their identified cartoon character (Cohen, 2001). In this step, the boy seems to lose his self-awareness to some degree and has seemed to absorb the traits of rescuing and saving others of Big hero. The absorption of the rescuing traits by the boy is shown in the below-mentioned lines:

Teacher: What inspires you the most about your hero?

Boy1: Rescuing others! I want to help others and rescue good people! (conversation, 06)

The boy conveys that he wants to rescue his family members too. So, he seems to make these traits part of his identity too.

Desire to be Independent

This theme has been found in the conversation of both the genders girls and boys. Both genders have been attracted to the independent nature of their respective genders.

Cohen (2001) implies sharing the feelings of cartoon characters is the initial step towards the identification process. A girl in one of the conversations seemed to share a familiar feeling with the character of Rapunzel, she mentioned that she feels sad when Rapunzel is locked in the castle.

Teacher: Okay tell me that when you saw Rapunzel locked up in a castle, what did you feel?

Girl 2: I felt sad because she wanted to explore the land but she couldn't. (conversation, 04)

In the cognitive phase, children not only tend to develop a better understanding but also tend to motivate the behaviour of their identified character (Cohen, 2001). The girl starts to share the perspective of Rapunzel, she also motivates her perspective of exploring the world, which means that she wants to explore the land by herself and wants to be independent.

Teacher: Tell me something about the perspectives of Rapunzel.



Girls: She wants to leave the castle because she wants to explore the world and she does not want to be locked up in the castle

Teacher: Where did you get this idea of exploring from?

Girl: It's from Rapunzel! (conversation, 04)

In the third step children's motivation for their favourite character's behaviour also develops a motivation in themselves to internalize those traits (Cohen, 2001). The girl starts to develop a sense of motivation in herself to internalize the goals of being independent and to explore the world. Moreover, to explore the world as evident from her conversation.

Teacher: Do you want to adopt or internalize these things also? Do you want to explore the world and be independent?

Girl: Yes, I want to be an explorer. (conversation, 04)

In absorption, the girls lose their self-awareness to some degree and start to absorb the independent nature of Rapunzel. As a girl states "I want to explore the world and want to be independent." This theme is evident in the conversations of both boys and girls both. As an exception girls seem to break the traditional stereotypes by showing the desire to be independent.

DISCUSSION

Cartoon characters are the popular medium in the inculcation of gender stereotypes in the identity of children. The five most relevant themes to gender stereotypes have been found in all the excerpts of children's conversations. These themes are "a desire for power and authority, a desire of Submissiveness and politeness, desire for knighthood, desire for beauty, a desire to save and rescue, and a desire to be independent. These recurring themes support the fact that cartoon characters cast an evident influence on the identity of children. The findings reveal that children need parents' supervision when children spend their time in front of the media. Confirming Ibrahim's (2016) conception we suggest that parents play a significant role in a child's identity construction because what they watch is often what is offered to them at home. Furthermore, the results of the study show that cartoon characters leave a long-lasting impact on children.

Boys have absorbed attributes in their behaviour such as Power and authority, desire for knighthood, desire to save and rescue, and desire to be independent. The findings have supported that in one way or the other, boys have absorbed the attributes which are considered



masculine like the power and strength of their favourite character. The boys have inferred that men should be authoritative and such thinking is the result of the portrayals of male characters in the cartoons. Likewise, all of the boys expressed the desire to save the world and the people around them. Their identification with their male cartoon characters has led them to share the sentiments of being a saviour and a rescuer with their favourite animated heroes. The previous studies have demonstrated that male cartoon characters have always been presented as powerful, sturdy, liberators and rescuers (Chu & McIntyre, 1995). Boys have identified with Superman, Spiderman, Ironman, and Captain America because of their strong independent nature, and knighthood qualities. Additionally, all the boys want to secure the world or people around them in one way or another. Existing literature in this field shows that all these cartoon characters have been portrayed stereotypically in the media. Hentges and Case (2013) have validated through their study that male cartoon characters' possession of power and strength, saving nature, and chivalrous behaviour are the traditional stereotypes. Corroborating this research Wiersma (2000) has also found that boys have been represented with muscular bodies but this study did not investigate its impact on children. This study shows that so much attachment with their favourite strong cartoon character traits cast an impact on child identity especially absorbing gender stereotypes. However, there are many instances in the data, which support the fact that some girls desire power. Furthermore, some girls also want to be independent. They want to explore the world and want to do their work themselves. This entails that there is a gradual change in the absorption of non-stereotypical traits by girls. So, out of their sheer interest in the cartoons, children internalize these behaviours attributed to men as well as females.

Apart from absorbing the traits of powers, girls usually identify themselves with the stereotypical female cartoon characters. Therefore, all the girls learn the characteristics like beauty, submissiveness, polite nature, and desire for the ideal physique as portrayed by the cartoons (Wiersma, 2000). Girls start to presume that these traits are admirable in real society. These instances have proved that cartoon characters have an impact on the identity of children concerning gender stereotypes. Moreover, the study has also brought forth that girls are only absorbing gender stereotypes associated with females. It is apparent through the recurring themes in the conversations such as beauty, submissive and polite behaviour of female cartoon characters, girls are more attracted to lean bodies and smart figures. Previous studies confirmed



that the protagonist female cartoon characters are always depicted as smart tall and lean and are drawn from most of the excerpts of the conversations (Gokcearslan, 2010; Lemish, 2015). England et al. (2011) has asserted through critical analysis of most popular animated films that mostly the characters in cartoons are portrayed according to their masculine and feminine trends and characteristics. They have objectified beauty through beautiful and decorative hairs and dresses. Female characters have been portrayed as sexually attractive. It is evident through the conversation of children and teachers that girls desire themselves to be beautiful, submissive and polite as well as the desire to have an ideal figure like Barbie, Cinderella, Anna, and so on. The girl that has identified herself with the character of Tinker Bell said, "She is a fairy and fairies are always beautiful". Keeping this in mind she said she wanted to be a fairy, and beautiful, and smart, like her. This might cast an impact on the minds of girls that a smart figure is a standard of beauty. Conclusively, most of the girls in the data have been absorbing the stereotypes of being beautiful, smart, and submissive. Apart from these traditional stereotypes, the study has proved that girls are also desiring for power and want to be independent in this developing world.

CONCLUSION

Media in the form of cartoons tends to influence the mind of children by presenting males and female cartoon characters stereotypically. Due to excessive exposure to cartoons on TV/Internet, their understanding of appearance, behaviour traits of males and females, and perceptions are shaped in the same way as presented by the characters in cartoons. The findings specify that cartoon characters are an important medium for the transmission of gender stereotypes in children's identity. Additionally, the results indicate that children absorb gender stereotypes presented by cartoon characters in the cartoon, such as watching cartoons creates a desire to save and rescue others and influence power. Moreover, girls have inculcated the desire for beauty, ideal physique, to be submissive and polite. Apart from inculcating these gender stereotypes, some instances have been found in the conversational excerpts which show that girls have been breaking stereotypes because girls desire power and want to be independent. Furthermore, the media should be more responsible in transmitting messages. The content should not be contrary to the local culture, values, and norms. Apart from this, the syllabus should be designed in such a way that will guide students on what they must watch. The syllabus should be used to decode these messages in the mind of children.



Children absorb gender stereotypes that affect their personalities. They absorb an already prescribed set of traits in their personality that are preconceived stereotypes that breed gender inequality in society and tend to absorb the traits found in the identity of their favourite cartoon characters. They make these traits part of their identity and try to behave in this way. In short, the content creators should be more aware of their responsibility for the content of cartoons they represent to children. We recommend that parents should restrict the children about the time limit to watch cartoons, as the more they will watch cartoons the more it will have an impact on them. Parents should keep in mind that all cartoons have some good and bad points. The point of romance and intimate love has long been ignored by parents and critics, so, some proper attention should be paid to this issue as well.

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