



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**TV Cartoon Programs: An Analysis of Gender Roles and Characteristics**

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**ABSTRACT**

Television is considered to be one of the most influential and powerful medium as it contributes a lot in determining the opinion of children regarding gender roles. In this context, the researchers attempted to investigate that how cartoon characters of different genders are represented and assigned roles and characteristics in children cartoon programs. For this purpose, the researchers analyzed 12 TV cartoon programs shown on Nickelodeon, Disney, Cartoon Network, and Pogo, from January 1st, 2017 to December 31st, 2017. The results of the study showed that male characters are given meaningfully more screen time and in the similar way they are more likely presented in leading roles in comparison to the female cartoon characters. However it was observed that there was no significant difference between cartoon characters of different genders regarding their representation as knowledgeable, intelligent, independent, ambitious, sporty, competent, and struggling against evils. It was also observed that female cartoons are more often shown as engaged in fostering children, household work, attractive and subtle

**Introduction**

Formative Television being the central arm of today's society has an immense influence on its consumers (Asamen & Berry, 1993). It is present today in almost every household. Children are a group of people who are big consumers of cartoon programs shown on TV. Cartoon programs play a significant role in the lives of kids. Sparks(2006) developed a priori of children's media use. According to him, learning, arousal, passing time, escape, relaxation, companionship, or habit or addiction could be the reason of watching TV. Cartoon programs are very impactful for children as they love to watch their favorite programs. In the contemporary world media has

become an important tool to foster the required behaviors and values among children. And there is no doubt about it that it has become significant agent to bring change.

Media research has always remained an area of research for social scientists. As argued by Potts & Martinez (1994) that myriads of researches had been undertaken to explain the various effects of Television on viewers, their learning patterns and behaviors. The previous studies gauge the impact of particular type of programs on children's attitude. The previous research mainly contributed to identify the gender wise representation and portrayal of cultural minority. Hapkiewicz (1979) asserted that from last twenty years women's presentations in different genre of media has remained a topic of great interest among the researchers. The previous researchers in this regard have concluded that females have remained less represented by the media. Even in the cartoon programs that are meant for kids have no exception, where women are presented as naïve as compared to the characters of opposite gender.

Pakistan is a unique country and has a culture which is an amalgamation of religious and geographical bearings. Children here learn norms and ethics from home and school but now media has emerged as a new contributor in a child's departments. Children learn from what they see happening around them. But when a child consumes TV content too much it creates a mediated reality for them. It was observed by researchers that at a very young age children become aware about the differences present between people of both the genders. Parentage, peer group, school and media contribute significantly in highlighting these differences. Children at an early age become known to socially acceptable behaviors (Albert, 1988). And television content plays a significant role in this attitude development.

The present research aims to investigate that how cartoon characters of both the genders are presented on screen and what roles and characters are given to them by various cartoon channels. As it is a matter of utmost concern that how TV content is contributing in shaping up a child's attitude towards gender roles. Gender role is a position which people take up due to their gender in a household or in a society. Male and female members of a family are usually seen to be doing gendered chores. But the prime concern here is that how media is showcasing these trends. When on one hand media is shouting about emancipation of women how it is teaching the children about gendered roles. And if media content meant for children is showing gender role stereotypes, how much and how many characters are shown in these roles.

The resent research has its vital importance as it attempts to investigate the images foreign media is fostering among the viewer's living in developing world through assigning roles and features to its characters belonging to both the genders. Furthermore, the research will also be resourceful for those who attempt to explore either children programming is following the previous way of presentation of boys and girls or is there any modification in the presentation of both the genders in the contemporary times where people of both the genders are striving together for the betterment of the society.

## **Literature Review**

In this section, the researchers attempted to present deep insight into gender roles and characteristics portrayed by media. Streicher (1974) noted that in cartoons females were presented in stereotypical characters that fell in love immediately with the male characters. Likewise, numerous other researchers also endorsed the same findings that females are presented in stereotypical manner (Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Mayes & Valentine, 1979).

Moreover, it was noted that females are portrayed as deserted creatures that had nothing to do with any important task whereas men are shown as hard working, demanding and resolving conflicts. Signorielli (1990) was of the opinion that television is not fair in representing females. It shows women in traditional roles such as teacher, waitress, nurse, and secretary. And even when shown in these roles women are not given any leading position. However, Jeanne & Debra (1996) commented that men characters are shown as strong and violent whereas women are portrayed as subordinate to men and passive.

According to Saxena (2011), television has major contribution in shaping the conception of viewers regarding gender roles. TV mainly presents women in traditional roles whereas male characters are not confined to roles such as father or husband but they are also presented as a sports person, a successful business tycoon and as a celebrity. The male characters rarely presented as idle, or unemployed. On the other hand, if women are presented as a strong or successful lady is also shown in a discontented in her private life. It was stressed that the television does not present the reality of the society and representation of males and females roles.

However, Disney movies presented male character as brave, strong and dominating who are always busy to support female characters and provide them protection whereas the females are shown attractive, fascinating, compassionate, submissive and erotic (England, Descartes & Collier- Meek, 2011). It was stressed that men and women characters in Cartoon Network are presented in conventional style and such representation has significant impact on conception related to the features of male and female among the society (Ahmed & Wahab, 2014).

Eron (as cited in Gokcearslan, 2010, p.1) claims that cartoon programs are not only the source of fun for child viewers but they also serve to educate them. Innocent cartoon characters convey many hidden messages that can be negative or positive for children. One of such negative message is related to the portrayal of gender. The roles assigned to characters are based on the stereotypes existing in society. The researcher is of the view that gender discrimination is not only the part of real world situation but it also exists in media portrayal of gender. Due to this children develop the concept of gender differences at a very early age and this concept becomes stronger and clear when they reach at the age of two

Downs (1981) study the presentation of sexes in TV programs and he maintains that the trend of gender portrayal has changed. The researcher further claims that the

decrease in stereotypical gender portrayal is evident in different TV programs. In this context, Signorielli & Bacue (1999) contend that although a decrease in stereotypical presentation is observed but still women characters are not given enough representation. The researchers are also of the view that media should focus on this matter and try to find ways for improvement.

Baker & Raney (2007) examined superheroes shown in cartoon programs in terms of their gender. Their study indicated that few differences existed in both the sexes performing as superheroes. The main difference was related to the gender of superhero character as mostly male characters are assigned the role of superhero. The researchers further maintain that female superheroes shown in children programs tend to exhibit masculine traits as compared to feminine traits. According to researchers, such portrayal is due to the focus of media content producers towards target audience and the programs exhibiting superheroes have mainly male target audience. William (1985) is of the view that gender stereotyping in television programs leads the children towards developing gendered beliefs.

Hentges Case (2013) argued that cartoon programs present male and female characters in a way that they both behave in similar pattern. They both tend to exhibit masculine behavior. Moreover, male characters do not show feminine traits. The researchers further claim that due to this kind of portrayal male viewers are less likely to be exposed to feminine traits and roles. After reviewing the previous literature, the following research questions and hypothesis are formulated for the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical support for the present research is taken from the theory of cultivation analysis. This theory of media effects was presented by George Gerbner in 1960's. as is obvious from the word "cultivation" the theory assumes that TV cultivates or creates a worldview that although possibly inaccurate becomes the reality because people believe it to be so. Gerbner and his associates mainly worked on the concept of violence but later on this theory has been extended to other areas of communication research. The researchers argue that TV presents a mediated reality. This is not "the reality". But due to the repeated exposure viewers start believing the TV world. TV affects gradually and steadily but eventually it creates a very major effect. It happens more forcefully if people view on TV the same trends that they are viewing happening around them.

As the present research deals with the presentation of gender roles and characteristics in TV cartoon, this is not out of question that these cartoons are not influencing children's thoughts, attitudes, ideologies and behaviors. As kids start watching cartoons from a very small age, these programs start affecting them gradually and thus it could be assumed under the assumptions of cultivation theory that eventually cultivate their minds with the patterns and trends shown through cartoon programs. As children act the way that they observe so it would not be wrong

to assume that they will act, think and behave in the same manner as they observe on screen.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ1: Is there any difference in the representation and roles assigned to male and female cartoon characters?

H 1.1: It is highly likely that female cartoon characters will be given less representation in cartoon programs than male cartoon characters.

H 1.2: It is highly likely that male cartoon characters will be portrayed more in lead roles than female cartoon characters.

RQ2: What is the difference in gender roles and characteristics assigned to male and female cartoon characters in cartoon programs?

H 2.1: It is highly likely that male cartoon characters will be shown as more intelligent, knowledgeable, hardy, sporty, independent, competent, ambitious and struggling against evils than female cartoon characters.

H 2.2: It is highly likely that female cartoon characters will be portrayed more as doing household chores, nurturing children, as beautiful, sensitive, submissive, and failing frequently than their male counterparts.

### **Material and Methods**

The present study employed quantitative research design. For this reason, quantitative content analysis is chosen as a method to investigate and evaluate the presentation of male and female characters in cartoon programs. Content analysis not only provides deep and detailed information relating to the issues but it is also helpful in understanding the themes, behaviors, and images presented by media.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population of the study comprised of all programs telecasted by Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Pogo and Disney from January 01, 2017 to December 31, 2017. The researchers chose twelve programs from these networks by employing the technique of simple random sampling. The complete sample is comprised of 192 hours of programming. The characters that appeared most frequently in the cartoon programs were considered as the unit of analysis for the study.

For the formulation of the coding sheet, the researcher studied the previous researches by Thompson & Zerbinos (1995); Signorielle (1990); Rosenwasser, Lingenfelter & Harrington (1989); Sternglanz and Serbin (1974); Chu & McIntyre (1995), Levinson (1975) and Mayes and Valentine (1979). On the basis of pilot study and the previous work, the researcher developed the coding sheet for the analysis of the data.

Two coders coded the TV content and later on Kappa test was applied on the data. The obtained Kappa value is 0.861 that shows perfect agreement between coders.

## Results and Discussion

H 1.1: It is highly likely that female characters will be given less representation in cartoon programs than male characters.

**Table 1**  
**Relationship between Gender and Representation of character in Cartoon Programs**

	Female	Male	z-score	p-value
Sample Prop.	0.28	0.72	-4.911525	0.0000 *
Sample Size	37	93		

The results of Table 4.1 supported the hypothesis and it is proved that male characters are given more representation in the programs as compare to female characters. The first research question explored the different roles given to male and female characters in the given programs. In this regard, the first hypothesis was made to explore the particular gender (male or female) of the character that is dominantly represented in the program. The statistical analysis strongly supported H1 as stated in Table 1. According to the results, the percentage representation of male characters (72%) is greater than the percentage representation of female characters (28%).

H 1.2: It is highly likely that male cartoon characters will be portrayed more in lead roles than female cartoon characters.

**Table 2**  
**Relationship between Gender of Cartoon and Lead Roles Assigned**

	Male	Female	z-score	p-value
Sample Prop.	0.84	0.64	2.4890	0.0060 *
Sample Size	93	37		

The result of the hypothesis 1.2 indicated that male characters were given leading roles than female's characters. So the hypothesis was accepted. The second hypothesis related to RQ1 sought to examine the difference in roles (lead or minor) given to the characters. The findings as explained in Table 4.2 supported the hypothesis. The findings demonstrated that the number of male characters (84%) depicted in lead roles is statistically significant and higher than female characters (64%). That is why it can be deduced that children TV programs are less likely to present female characters in lead roles while male characters are given more preference in this regard.

H 2.1: It is highly likely that male cartoon characters will be shown as more intelligent, knowledgeable, hardy, sporty, independent, competent, ambitious and struggling against evils than female cartoon characters.

**Table 3**  
**Relationship between Gender of Cartoon Characters and the Portrayal of Gender Specific Characteristics**

Gender specific characteristics	Proportion Of Male Cartoon Characters	Proportion Of Female Cartoon Characters	z-value	p-value
Intelligent	0.96	1.00	-1.9685	0.9754
Knowledgeable	0.75	0.84	-1.1974	0.8844
Hardy	0.89	0.73	2.0031	0.0225 *
Sporty	0.74	0.65	0.9928	0.1603
Independent	0.92	0.95	-0.6585	0.7449
Competent	0.95	0.89	1.0671	0.1427
Ambitious	0.85	0.89	-0.6311	0.7360
Struggling against evils	0.58	0.54	0.4140	0.3394

The findings of the hypothesis 2.1 were partially rejected. Because the results related to gender specific characteristics were insignificant. The second research question had two hypotheses. The first hypothesis in this regard aims to examine the qualities associated to the characters on gender basis. The statistical findings related to H 2.1 stated in Table 4.3 did not support the hypothesis. The findings in this regard showed that the potentials such as (intellectual, sporty, well-informed, self-determining, aspiring, fighting against troubles and competent) were not more significantly associated to male cartoon characters only. An analysis of results also depicted that female characters also exhibited the above mentioned traits and no significant difference was evident between both the sexes in reflecting these qualities. Furthermore, the achieved results also demonstrated that only the quality hardy was more likely to be reflected by male characters.

H 2.2: It is highly likely that female cartoon characters will be portrayed more as doing household chores, nurturing children, as beautiful, sensitive, submissive, and failing frequently than their male counterparts.

**Table 4**  
**Relationship between Gender of Cartoon Characters and Assigning of Gender Specific Roles and Characteristics**

Gender related roles and characteristics	Proportion of Male Cartoon Characters	Proportion of Female Cartoon Characters	z-value	p-value
Doing household chores	0.34	0.51	1.7756	0.0380*
Nurturing children	0.37	0.57	2.0930	0.0181*
Beautiful	0.80	1.00	4.8218	0.0000*

Sensitive	0.76	0.92	2.5456	0.0054 *
Submissive	0.39	0.35	-0.4286	0.6659
Failing frequently	0.54	0.35	-2.0231	0.9782

The findings of the table 4 supported the hypothesis. It was observed that females were shown in performing, house hold chores, fostering kids, charming and delicate as compare to men. So the hypothesis was accepted. The overall, results showed that females were mostly presented in doing house hold tasks, supporting children and they were beautiful and charming. The achieved empirical outcome stated in Table.4.4 strongly accepted the proposed hypothesis H 2.2. The researchers can conclude that cartoon shows mainly exhibited female characters in stereotypical way as the statistical outcome indicated that they were more likely to be shown as nurturing children and performing house hold chores. Furthermore, the qualities such as (beautiful and sensitive) were more significantly exhibited by female characters. As long as the personality traits (failing frequently and submissive) were concerned the findings did not suggest that there existed a statistically significant difference between both the genders. In this regard, cartoon programs had different pattern.

In this research project the researchers mainly endeavored to discuss the results of two core research questions. It was observed that the results were according to the results of the previous literature. Many of the researches that were conducted in western countries were providing the same or similar results as were yielded by the present research.

The first research question of the current research was about the differences in the representation and roles assigned to male and female cartoon characters? The results indicated that female characters are getting significantly less depiction in cartoons than males. The result found here are congruent to the studies of past as the previous research studies yielded the similar results. A review of previous research literature explained that many researchers argued that in children cartoon programs male characters not only received more representation but they were also shown in variety of roles in comparison to their female counterparts (Streicher 1974; Levinson 1975; Hapkiewics 1979; Barcus 1983; Thompson & Zerbinos 1995; Akerman et al. 2008; Hentges & Case 2013; & Jaggi & Reddy 2017). It was also observed that male characters were shown abundantly in leading roles. These findings were also found in agreement with the results of past research work as the previous researchers strongly conformed that children programs mainly presented male characters in dominant and leading roles whereas their female counterparts were assigned less important or minor roles (Barcus 1983; Williams 1992; & Leaper, Breed, Hoffman & Perlman 2002).

The obtained results clearly demonstrate that children cartoon program producers were following the past pattern of presenting men and women by showing male characters in leading roles. Similarly, the number of female characters performing in children programs also did not reflect the actual status of women in the current society. Here it can be argued that media do not reflect the true picture regarding the



position of women that she is having in contemporary world where they are contributing as much to the society as men.

The second research question was about the difference in gender roles and characteristics assigned to male and female cartoon characters in cartoon programs. This question was devised by the researchers to have an in-depth understanding into the way cartoon programs affiliate certain personal qualities and tasks to both the sexes on the basis of their respective gender. The results of this research question showed that "hardy" was the only trait which was found in male characters in more abundance as compared to the female characters. The rest of the traits were found almost equally among the characters of both the genders. So it could be assumed that children's content creators have not surveyed the previous trends for allocating qualities to both the sexes rather they have assigned qualities to both the genders on equal basis. This could be taken as a progressive gesture. A review of past research work indicated that the findings of current research were not congruent to the results and findings of past. It was argued by past researchers (Signorielli 1990; & Thompson and Zerbinos 1995) on the basis of their research that cartoon programs were more likely to present male cartoons as intelligent, powerful, assertive, competent, and independent as compared to female cartoon characters. Moreover the researchers explored that the gender specific traits as explored in the current research were in partial agreement with the results of previous studies as media scientists of the past conform that children TV shows usually present male and female characters in stereotypical way, presenting women as submissive, nurturing children, troublesome, beautiful, showing interest in household tasks and dependent (Signorielli, 1990; Thompson and Zerbinos 1995; Barner 1999; Johnson 2002; & Aubrey & Harrison 2004).

## **Conclusion**

The current research study is very significant as it gives in-depth information regarding the depiction of male and female cartoon characters in the programs. The research also provides information about gender specific characters and their different features. The findings of the research indicated that male cartoon characters are dominantly represented in the cartoon programs than the female characters. Likewise, male characters are presented in leading roles as compared to the female characters. It is denoted that in representing gender the cartoon programs do not represent the reality of the society. It means in representing gender, the cartoon programs follow the traditional patterns. Moreover, the study suggested that television does not reflect the real world situation regarding the representation of males and females.

The findings further found that cartoon programs have adopted the traditional way of presenting male and female characters while assigning roles to them with respect to their respective gender. The cartoon programs do not follow balanced approach while choosing roles for male and female characters. It is observed that male characters are chosen for strong and dominant role while females are presented in minor or supportive characters. The study also found that the male characters are likely to be presented as strong, assertive and leading.

Furthermore, the results indicated that there were variations amongst male and female characters related to dispense of potentials such as knowledgeable, intellectual, active, ambitious self-determining, skilled and fighting against troubles. On the other hand, the females are shown in domestic settings. They are busy in house chores and taking care of children. They are represented as beautiful, attractive and subtle. Additionally, they are more obedient and fragile.

To conclude, it can be stated that as far as the qualities such as sporty, intellectual, well-informed, ambitious and self-determining are concerned, women are shown in stereotypically masculine ways. This type of portrayal actually influences girls to get motivation from masculine conduct and characteristics. Moreover, the male characters are never exposed as presenting feminine traits and behavior. In limited instances, female characters are represented as displaying masculine behaviors but at the same time, they are also shown as displaying feminine traits too which helps the viewers to differentiate them from their male counterparts.

The current research after the careful observation of data and conducting a rigorous literature review concludes that no doubt children start learning about gender specific roles from a very young age because this is what TV cartoons are cultivating in them. As is described by cultivation theory people when watch TV for longer periods of time they start believing what they watch on TV. And when they observe the same behaviors around them it gives their opinion a "double dose effect." If TV programs would not change the way they are depicting male and female characters, society would not experience any modified change in gender roles no matter how forcefully society will strive for it.

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