

VISUAL LITERACY THROUGH CARTOON CHARACTERS- A STUDY OF THE CARTOON PROGRAMMES IN WEST BENGAL

Mou Mukherjee-Das¹, Dr Mausumi Bhattacharyya²

¹Research Scholar, ¹Assistant Professor, ²Associate Professor & In charge

^{1,2} Centre for Journalism and Mass Communication

¹Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

^{1,2} Visva Bharati University

¹Aliah University

mou.mukherjeedas@gmail.com

Abstract— Cartoons are perennial source of fun and entertainment for all ages and countries, with primary target focusing on the kids. When it comes to talking about India, the children's genre has emerged as the largest viewership segment after India's General Entertainment Channel (GEC) sector. The channels are trying all possible means to develop their own unique selling proposition to woo this segment. Children being very fickle minded it has become a hard task for the communicators to develop the content. The researcher through two most diametrically opposite socio-economic segments of West Bengal –semi-urban (Bolpur) and urban area (Durgapur), tries to analyze the most important factor in successful marketing of cartoon characters- the resonance that the children feel towards a particular cartoon character. The researcher conducted a child association test (CAT), among the children of both vernacular and English medium. The researcher found that the children irrespective of language, culture and social fabric resonated with characters which appealed to their senses and the different factors of visual communication play an important role in determining their favourite characters.

Index terms- cartoons, visual, children, entertainment, communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cartoon channels are relatively an upcoming genre in the entertainment sector. Previously there were comic books but after the entry of electronic media these genre became an instant hit with the children. Initially cartoons were broadcasted on the Doordarshan but gradually after the liberalization, privatization and globalization concept in the 1980's, the media houses from the west made a beeline in India to tap this segment and was fast enough to catch the pulse of the little kids. The kids in India have long been accustomed to stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata, which were mythological stories, even comics like Indrajaal, Amar Chitra Katha, Lot-Pot were also hugely popular but animated cartoons with lots of humour, fun, action and adventure was something very new. Children immediately got hooked to this segment and became more demanding. Cartoon channels have always enticed small

children owing to its vibrant and colourful nature. The children have been able to relate themselves to the cartoon characters. From the days of comics like Indrajaal and Lot-Pot the cartoon genre has evolved manifold, forming an integral part of a child's life.

Children in their young and tender age learn a lot from cartoons as they can relate to their favourite characters and the environment or the situations in which they live. Visual literacy in this aspect forms an important constituent to shape cognitive, affective and conative behaviour of a children. Every day in their lives, they are bombarded with images-still as also visual either through cartoons or through comic strips. A whole range of technologies have evolved surrounding this- photographs, video and diverse media through Facebook, twitter, online blogs, you tube and other paraphernalia's. Thus as Bauman says the visual term can be understood as a response to this newly configured global and networked landscape marked by the social, cultural and economic trajectories of late modernity: fluidity, speed, saturation, frenzied pixilation and immediacy (Bauman 1998; castells 2001). And as Kress says "the terrain of communication, creativity and education is changing in profound ways. Traditional uses of literacy and associated means for representing and communicating are mutating at every level and in every domain (Kress 2003). 2

Role of visual literacy in shaping the behaviour of the children-

When John Debes, the founder of the international visual literacy society (IVLA), coined the term in 1969, he proposed the following definition:

Visual literacy refers to a group of vision competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of

these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication” (as cited in Ganwer, 2009, p 2). Ganwer also felt that a person “becomes visually literate by the practice of visual encoding (expressing thoughts and ideas in visual form) and visual decoding (translating the content and meaning of visual imagery)” (Ganwer, 2009, p3).

Visual literacy has been defined as the “ability to understand, interpret and evaluate visual messages.” (Bristor & Drake, 1994). Visual literacy as a concept was in its initial days more limited to arts and painting genre where the effects of lighting and shadow, colour, shades, composition were analysed and deconstructed to read a painting. With gradual rise in the complexities in meanings and inclusion of photography, moving images it became imperative to learn about visual meanings of everything thus widening of the genre. Images in today’s world create powerful, persuasive impressions in an audience’s mind and send across strong messages that can have a lasting impact upon the receivers. Effective visual literacy generates successful visual communication. Cartoons communicate in various ways or rather we may say the factors responsible for successful visual communication are -

1. Body language of characters.
2. Gestures(movements of hands)
3. Facial expression
4. Verbal communication
5. Tone of voice
6. Setting or the background of the pictures.
7. Stereotypes and caricatures
8. Words used by the characters (speech bubbles)
9. Thoughts of the characters (thought bubbles).
10. Scale of each character in relation to the another. (Importance and presentation of the cartoon characters).
11. Colours used in the cartoons.
12. The environment in which the character is set.
13. The overall presence of the characters
14. The storyline.
15. The characteristics feature portrayed by the characters.
16. The conversations, in-between dialogues of the characters.
17. The actions.

Cronin, Farrell and Delaney conducted a study in which children were taught to read some logographs. The children were also taught the same words as sight words. The children learned the words presented in a logographic context more quickly than those who learned the words without context. (in Pressley, 2006). This research indicated that “reading” pictures or developing visual literacy is a step along the path of reading development. Children learn to read pictures like the stop sign, the McDonalds logo, the Pokémon logo, and the Doraemon pictures even before they learn to read which further facilitates the development of actual reading of words.

And as Robert E. Horn, Stanford University’s centre for the study of language and information, agreed:

When words and visual elements are closely entwined, we create something new and we augment our communal intelligence ...visual language has the potential for increasing ‘human bandwidth’- the capacity to take in, comprehend, and more efficiently synthesize large amounts of new information. (Ganwer, 2009, p 5).

II. OBJECTIVE

The researcher wanted to study the aspect of visual literacy and thus communication from the children view point as children are more addicted to cartoons in the formative years. Not much has been studied on this topic as how visuals form an important part of a communication especially with an acquired language, that which is not his/her mother tongue. It is in this context that the author wants to study the factors responsible for visual communication among children when they watch cartoons. The study proposes to cover major cartoon programmes in the major cartoon television channels in India, they being- Disney, Cartoon Network, Pogo, and Nickelodeon and how children learn an acquired language by watching these channels. And then find out whether there is any difference between the choices of programmes preferred by the children in the two sub-divisions.

III. HYPOTHESES

A. Null hypotheses

Choice of popular characters are governed by the factors of visual communication that takes place in the children while watching cartoon programmes.

B. Alternative hypotheses

Choice of popular characters are not governed by the factors of visual communication that takes place in the children while watching cartoon programmes.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In doing so the researcher has taken the population of the two most important socio-economic segments –semi-urban (Bolpur) and urban area (Durgapur) of West Bengal, for her study. Primary Schools were selected through systematic random sampling. 764 schools in vernacular medium and 64 schools in English medium were collected from Durgapur sub-division. The researcher has considered taking 10% of the total population of schools i.e. 80 schools. Through proportional representation the researcher took 73 vernacular and 07 English medium schools. Similarly in Bolpur there are 910 primary schools of which 902 are Bengali medium schools and 08 are English medium schools. As per the previous rule the researcher has taken 10 % of the total population i.e. 90 schools. Through proportional representation the researcher took 89 vernacular and 01 English medium schools.

The researcher considered 10% of the total population of the students in each class. The students were then selected through the random number table of the classes from two to four, from the selected schools of each subdivisions were then

done. A total of 870 students in vernacular medium and 79 in English medium from Durgapur sub-division and 752 students in vernacular medium and 20 students from English medium were surveyed. The students were surveyed one to one basis on a set of questionnaires.

As children were small and attention span is very less-

1. Close ended questions were asked regarding availability of cartoon channels in their area, their preference for a particular cartoon characters, and best friend as cartoons, which cartoons they did not like.
2. Word association test- certain words were given to assess which cartoon characters they feel resemble the most to observe how well they understand human characters. In way it was a study to understand their cognitive behaviour.

Multiple choice based questions- they were designed after the pilot test was conducted. It was observed through sentence completion test, the probable answers that a respondent can give against a particular answer. Then they were structured to give a multiple choice format. The students were asked questions in Hindi and English, in Bengali speaking areas to understand how much they have learnt the language. And also to see whether language is a barrier in communication in both the sub-divisions and whether choice of programmes differ because of this barrier. One to one interview was conducted so that the respondents don't influence each other's answers.

V. RESULTS

According to the survey it was found that both the sub-divisions rated Chhota Bheem as the most popular programme although language played an important role in both the sub-divisions with Durgapur sub-division having more proficiency in Hindi as also English and Bolpur comparatively having less proficiency in these two languages owing to demographic and socio-economic structure. But when it came to choice of popular cartoon programme and channel it was a unanimous choice. But as the sample size is different it became imperative to see whether proportion of viewers of Chhota Bheem in Durgapur are same to that of the proportion of viewers of Chhota Bheem in Bolpur. Therefore she had conducted z test to measure popular cartoon channel across the two sub-divisions

$H_0 - P_1 = P_2$

$H_1 - P_1 \neq P_2$

P_1 = proportion of viewers in Durgapur.

P_2 = proportion of viewers in Bolpur.

$$Z = \frac{\hat{p}_1 - \hat{p}_2}{\sqrt{\hat{p}(1-\hat{p})\left(\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2}\right)}}$$

VI. DECISION

The value of z test came to 1.4867.

Value of z at 5% level of significance = 1.96.

VII. CONCLUSION

As the value of z found out is less than the table value it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between the two sub-divisions. Thus the null hypotheses is accepted rejecting the alternative hypotheses.

Analysis of the findings

The researcher found that-

1. The channel Pogo is widely available in all the regions of both the sub-divisions and there is no network or signal problem either.
2. The character Chhota Bheem is name sake of a very popular character in mythology called Bheem and is known for his eating habits and huge strength. Moreover in rural Bengal often mothers tell stories of his bravery to their children, so that they emulate Bheem in their show of courage.
3. The stories of Chhota Bheem revolves around his bravery and win of good over evil and is set in a village within a very cosy environment with his friends. The children can relate these with their own environment which is why the serial is a hit with them.
4. Also the characters portray Indian cultures and traditions like Mela or festivals like Raksha Bandhan, Holi, and Diwali and so on. Friendship is highly valued and evil is destroyed at the end restoring faith in the good. Each episode teaches some moral values but with a tinge of entertainment, fun and humour, which makes the programme and the character all the more lovable.
5. The Chhota Bheem is a programme that can be watched by the adults also, which makes it a family entertainer. In my another question many small children answered that they prefer to watch programmes with their friends or siblings or parents, which explains in way the importance of family bonding in India.
6. Chhota Bheem is an exponent of gender equity also. The female characters like Rani Indumati and Chutki are portrayed with equal élan. Chutki is shown to fight with the demons with equal ease and help her friends in times of danger making herself at par with her male friends. Chutki personified as brave yet simple and never to run away from danger in a way reflects the mindset of modern women.
7. A perfect mix of tradition with modernity, Chhota Bheem has been a pioneer in paving paths to other same type of serials like Mighty Raju, Vir-The robot boy, and Kumbhkarani

Popularity of Chhota Bheem can also be attributed to the merchandised products available under its brand name. Starting from dresses to children stationeries to games it is available everywhere. Also a total retail outlet dedicated to children on Chhota Bheem has been designed by the production house Green Gold Animation

Cartoons	Vernacular (Durgapur)	Vernacular(Bolpur)
Chhota Bheem	421	326
Motu-Patlu	200	102
Tom & jerry	14	20
Oggy	52	85
Little Krishna	Did not come up in the survey	81
Ninja Hatori	45	Did not come up in the survey
Doraemon	110	81
Henri	07	Did not come up in the survey
Power rangers	02	Did not come up in the survey
Pokemon	15	04
Ben 10.	04	Did not come up in the survey
Sinchan	Did not come up in the survey	15
Vir-the robot	Did not come up in the survey	10
Shaun the sheep	Did not come up in the survey	17
Roll no 21	Did not come up in the survey	09
Kumbhkarani	Did not come up in the survey	02.

Table 1-Favourite cartoon programmes

When the children were asked as to what characteristic features they liked in these cartoons they answered-

Rank according to preference	The characteristics	Vernacular	English	total
3 rd	The story	113	11	124
5 th	Pretty colours	90	13	103
6 th	Animation	57	04	61
1 st	The characters	360	27	387
7 th	The voice	44	03	47
2 nd	The action	115	11	126
4 th	The humour	91	10	101
total		870	79	949

Table 2-Durgapur sub-division

Rank according to preference	The characteristics	Vernacular	English	total
2 nd	The story	121	04	124
5 th	Pretty colours	64	02	66
7 th	Animation	43	01	44
1 st	The characters	291	08	299
6 th	The voice	52	03	55
3 rd	The action	98	01	99
4 th	The humour	83	01	84
Total		752	20	772

Table 3-Bolpur sub-division

The characters and the story line made the most impact as they could relate to the cartoons which portrayed their lifestyle, their friends and peer group and their surroundings in both the mediums of communication. Like they appreciated the character Chhota Bheem. For them the Chhota Bheem is the local hero and main inspiration. In another question they could also tell the characteristics features of many cartoon characters they could immediately identify the characters with the cartoons. Below the researcher provides a table where the children related certain popular characters with their behavioural patterns and characteristic features.

And on cross validating their choice, they were asked spontaneously about certain cartoon characters and what they felt about these cartoon characters at their first recall through unaided techniques.

Characteristics	Cartoons
Brave	Chhota Bheem
Funny	Motu-Patlu, Oggy .
Coward	Nobita,
Cunning	Kaalia, Suniyo. Amara, Tom.
Naughty	Jiyan, Shinzo, Sinchan. Jerry .
Simple	Suzuka ,
Friendly	Doraemon, Ninja Hatori.
Lovable	Shishimaro,
Timid	Nobita , Kenny g.
Shy	
Sweet	Suzuka, Umeeeco, shinzo.
Obedient	Umeeeco

Table 4

Next to it are the actions, the voice and the humour part of the cartoons that kept them hooked to the cartoons as that is the reason why the children watch cartoons for entertainment.

Therefore we see Oggy and the cockroaches, Tom and Jerry, Pokémon also in their list.

While interviewing the researcher through various proxy variable found certain most astounding facts- many children showed drawings of cartoons which they had learnt from television channels. This is especially in the case of rural children where they can't afford to keep drawing teachers and television provides them that world of knowledge.

Many children aspired to be cartoonists, story writers which the researcher found to be quite amusing as that have emerged as a new profession.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Therefore it can be safely concluded that the choice of popular characters are governed by the factors of visual communication that takes place in the children while watching cartoon programmes. Visual literacy can be utilized effectively and innovatively to reach out to the children in their formative years.

REFERENCES

1. Baumann, Z. (1998). *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Oxford: Polity Press
2. Bristor, V.J. and Drake, S.V (1994), " Linking the Language Arts and Content Areas through Visual Technology" *T H E journal*. 22.2. pp 74-78.
3. Castells, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: reflections on the Internet, business, and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Ganwer, T. (2009). *Visual impact, visual teaching* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
5. Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge.
6. Pressley, M. (2006). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching*. New York: The Guilford Press.
7. *Visual Language and Converging Technologies in the Next 10-15 Years (and Beyond)* by Robert E. Horn Visiting Scholar Stanford University
<http://web.stanford.edu/~rhorn/a/recent/artclNSFVisualLan gv.pdf>
<http://unllib.unl.edu/LPP/donaldson-zanin-yost.html>