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Children's Knowledge of TV Content Ratings System in Western Kenya

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Abstract:

TV content ratings systems were put in place as a way of reducing media effects on children, however, there is almost no insight into children's understanding and reception of this system in different contexts. This study examines Kenyan children's knowledge of the current TV content ratings system. Purposive sampling was used to recruit 15 participants from eight villages within Uasin Gishu County in Kenya. In-depth interviews conducted in Swahili, English or Sheng were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Thematic analysis was performed. Generally, children were knowledgeable about the current TV content ratings system but not quite receptive of this system due to the leniency in ratings especially in the 'PG' category. Children in most households are being exposed to inappropriate TV content due to lack of parental guidance in regards to television viewership, leniency of the current TV content ratings system and influence from their elder siblings on when to watch TV, what to watch on TV and how long to watch TV. This study has demonstrated the need for the development of a new TV content rating system in Kenya that stands as a genuine system for safeguarding and protecting the fundamental rights of children. This new system should be developed not just based on parents' report of their knowledge and perception of TV content rating system but also on children's knowledge and perception of these ratings. Furthermore, there is need for a shift of focus from studies on TV content ratings systems perception to implementation of actual parental guidance in TV viewership among children.

Keywords: TV Content ratings system, children's knowledge, media effects

1. Introduction

So much has been researched and documented on media effects on human behavior especially on children prompting Berelson (1959) to warn that the field of media effects was withering away (Katz, 1959). However, Berelson's prediction is yet to be achieved, in fact, the study of media effects has remained robust. Media effects is a central focus of the study of Mass Communication and according to Perse (2001) much of the empirical research published in the major Mass Communication journals concerns the effects of the mass media. Most research on the effects of mass media on human behavior has focused on Television as a medium. This could be because TV can be argued to be the most popular entertainment medium worldwide. The Deloitte's "State of Media Democracy" report of 2012 revealed that we spend about twice as much time watching TV as any other entertainment medium despite the many digital distractions such as smartphones, tablet computers, video games, etc. In fact, according to this report people are watching about two hours more of TV than before (Taylor & Alcorn, 2012).

Studies have also revealed that children spend more time watching TV than they pay attention to any other media. Children in Britain, for example, spend an average of 2 hours 40 minutes in front of the television every day (Thomas, 2011). In America, TV is increasingly turning into an electronic babysitter with children spending more time before the screen. According to Nielsen (2010), preschoolers in America, aged 2-5 spend 32.5 hours a week in front of the TV while older pre-teens, aged 6-11, spend 28 hours in front of the TV. Studies have shown that if a child spends more than 2 hours on TV, TV becomes a potent source of information to the child (Yalcin, Tugrul, Nacar, Tuncer, & Yurdakok, 2002). Various studies in America and Europe have linked children's too much TV viewing time to negative outcomes such as violence, risky behaviors (such as engaging in pre-marital sex, drugs and alcohol abuse), obesity, among others (Wagner, 2001; Leone & Houle, 2004; Brown et al. 2006; Sargent et al. 2006).

Recent studies in America, Canada and Europe have suggested that children in America, Canada and Europe are getting exposed to inappropriate TV content (Leone & Bissell, 2005; Leone & Osborn, 2004). A study conducted in 2012 by Ipsos-Reid in Canada suggests that more than 40% of children have been exposed to unsuitable TV programming (Grant, 2012). Another study conducted for Christian charity Mothers' Union in 2010 revealed that two thirds of parents in the UK believe that children are exposed to unsuitable content on television (Union, 2010). Children's exposure to inappropriate TV content has far reaching consequences on the children and on society as a whole given that these consequences could last long after the TV watching. The consequences include teenage pregnancies, teenage shooting, teenage irresponsible drinking, etc. (Grier, 2001; Collins et al. 2004; Sargent et al. 2006).

As a way of reducing these media effects on children, TV content ratings systems were put in place with America being the first country to put up such a system (www.telebison.net). With the successful implementation of a PG-Rating system in America, many European countries and a few Asian countries followed suit. In Africa, TV content rating systems seems like a far-fetched dream with South Africa being the only African country with a standardized ratings system. In Kenya, we have a TV content rating system that

was put in place by the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) in 2010. However not all TV stations use these ratings system, in fact most stations use the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system.

TV Content Rating Systems have become necessary so as to provide parents with information that helps them make informed decisions about the kind of TV content that their children get exposed to. However, since these ratings are meant for children, it is important to find out children's knowledge of these ratings. With the exemption of America, there is almost no literature on children's knowledge of TV content ratings in other countries. This is fundamental section of the area of media effects that needs to be studied so as to reveal what children know about TV content ratings and their perception of these ratings. This knowledge will help in the development of TV content ratings that are age appropriate for children in different contexts. Three years after the introduction of a TV Content Ratings system in 2010 by the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB), there is almost no insight into Kenyan children's understanding and reception of this system. No study has revealed what children know about these TV Content Ratings. Hence, it becomes necessary to investigate this issue.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Study Setting

This qualitative study was carried out in eight villages of one location in Uasin Gishu County. Uasin Gishu County lies on the northern part of Rift Valley Province, in the Western region of Kenya.

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 participants from 170 households that had participated in an earlier quantitative study. These 15 participants were selected based uniqueness of the information that their parents had provided during the qualitative study, family composition whereby the participant had to be from a two-parent household and finally the participants had to be aged between 7 and 16 years old and able to express themselves clearly in English, Swahili or Sheng. English is the official language in Kenya, Kiswahili is national language, while 'Sheng' is slang widely used by the Kenyan youth and it is more of a sign of identity among the Kenyan youth.

2.3. The Data Collection Techniques

2.3.1. In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews, participant observation and diaries were used to generate data for this study. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes and they were conducted in the language that participants were comfortable using, that is, English, Kiswahili or 'Sheng'. The interview took 30-40 minutes per participants with the first 3-7 minutes being used to establish a rapport. All the interviews were audio-recorded but the researcher also took notes.

2.3.2. Diaries

After the interviews, participants were issued with a diary each and requested to write what programs they watched, at what time and with whom. They were requested to write down this information daily for a period of 1 and half months. Given the fact that the government provides free primary education; these children were able to express themselves well through stories and diaries.

2.3.3. Observation

Observations were conducted one week after the interview and they took place for two days in the homes of the participants. The observation mostly took two to three hours a day and it occurred over the weekend. In this observation, I would watch TV with the family from around 3pm when the parents are less busy to around 6:00 pm. The purpose of engaging in this kind of observation was to identify those actions that participants rarely articulate despite participating in them. These are the actions that are taken for granted by families during TV viewing. The observation made it possible to document the family dynamics that take place when the family is watching a TV program. Observation made it possible to distinguish between what the participants said they do while I was interviewing them and what they actually do, and investigating any contradictions between the two. People at times demonstrate their understanding of a process better by their actions than by verbally explaining their knowledge (Walliman & Baiche, 2001).

2.4. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed thematically and this process involved six steps (Creswell, 2003; Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The first step involved only transcribing all the interviews (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011) since field notes were already in transcript form. The second step was to read each transcript line by line to make sure that it made sense, to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on the data's overall meaning (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The third step began the coding process. During the coding process, Nvivo, software that aids in the organization and analysis of content from interviews, audio, social media and web pages was used. The coding process in this study took three phases; the open coding phase (third step), axial coding phase (fourth step) and finally the selective coding phase which was the fifth step (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). The sixth step was to embark on giving an explanation of the data in a manner that would make sense to a reader; this is what Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) refer to as narration. It was at this stage that the researcher told the story of the participants to the readers by paraphrasing the statements of the participants and retaining a few direct quotations. The final write-up consisted of summaries, interpretations and textual excerpts as presented in this paper.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

IRB clearance and permission from the District Commissioner were sought prior to embarking on data generation. During the data collection phase, the researcher read through the informed consent with the participants' parents so that they could clearly understand the nature of research and their children's rights and sought consent from the parents/guardians. However, gaining consent from adult gatekeepers did not necessarily mean that the child was willing to participate. Children themselves are able to decide whether or not they want to take part. And in order to avoid situations where children felt like they must participate because their parents/guardians have agreed to the research, the researcher asked the children to make their own independent decision on whether they wanted to participate in this study or not. All the children approached agreed to participate in the study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

2.6. Trustworthiness

The data collection tools were piloted before rolling out the study for purposes of validity. Triangulation was achieved by use of various data collection techniques as mentioned above and also by gathering data from different participants (Jwan & Ong'ondo, 2011). Finally, specific descriptions of the first draft of the research report were taken back to participants to determine whether these participants felt that they were accurate. All the participants were satisfied with how the data had been presented and gave the researcher a go-ahead to use the data in writing their research report.

3. Results

The majority (11 out of 15) of the participants in this study were female, aged between 7 and 16 years old and in primary school (12 out of 15).

Findings are presented according to the following main themes that emerged from the researcher's analyses; children's knowledge of TV content rating system, factors influencing children's exposure to inappropriate TV content and children's views on parental guidance and/or control in regards to TV viewership.

3.1. Children's Knowledge of TV Content Rating System.

Children are knowledgeable about TV content rating systems. Children were especially more conversant with the GE and the PG ratings. Only 1 out of the 15 children interviewed did not know the meaning of these ratings. When asked whether she knew what the various PG-ratings meant, just like most of the children, Debra a 10-year-old primary school child from village A said "... I only know PG is parental guide and GE-General Exhibition." Very few children like Lucy a 13-year-old primary school pupil from village E but studies in a boarding school, were conversant with all the PG ratings, "Yes. GE-General exhibition, PG-Parental guidance, PG-13-parental Guidance in 13 years and above, PG-16-parental Guidance in 16 years and above."

There was however one child who had an idea of what PG meant but just like some parents was confused over the meaning of these PG-ratings. When asked whether she knew what the various PG-ratings meant, Purity a 16-year-old secondary school student from Village F said,

- PG means that some content in that program are adult in nature so you should watch it with your parents, PG-13 means that actually those under the age of 13 should watch with their parents more than those above 13. GE means General exhibition, meaning everyone can watch.

All the PG knowledgeable children except two learnt the meaning of these ratings from the TV itself. One of these children, Purity, learnt it from her elder sibling and unfortunately as mentioned above, she got the wrong meaning of these PG-ratings,

- When I was young I normally wanted to watch movies that come after 10 p.m. but my elder sister would always tell me to they are rated PG-16 so they are for kids aged over 16 only. She would then force me to go sleep.

The other child, Dan, a 14-year-old secondary school student from village H, learnt it from his parents,

- ...it's my parents who tell me there are some programs that I should watch and others that I should not. They even told me that if you see a program rated PG-13 and you are 13 years old and above, you can watch but if it's rated PG I watch with my parents and GE I can watch alone.

3.2. Parental Guidance in Regards to TV Viewership

This study established that most children watch PG-Rated programs and specifically soap operas unaccompanied. Most (8) children reported watching TV all day without any parental guidance. Cynthia a 13-year-old primary school girl from Village F pointed out that she at times watches TV till morning especially over the weekends and during school break period. She further said that she mostly views TV alone, but at times she does so with her elder sister who is in University. Similarly, Peter a 11-year-old primary school pupil from village H, also spoke of watching soap operas on TV alone most of the time because when these soap operas are running on TV, his mum is busy preparing dinner in the kitchen and his three-year-old sister is asleep. Likewise, Emily's TV viewership is unmonitored, she said, "I just at times stop watching some programs on my own, no one tells me not to."

An analysis of diaries of children from households that had parents indicating being knowledgeable of television rating gave the real picture of the situation. All the children from these four households noted watching PG-Rated programs and specifically soap operas alone most of the time. The only other people they watched these programs with were their siblings or friends who in most cases were younger than them. These findings reflect an unregulated and unguided access to television programs by children, most of who are not supposed to watch some television programs, or should watch under guidance by parents.

3.3. Children's Views on Parental Guidance in Regards to TV Viewership

This study further established that most children do not appreciate it when their parents choose for them the type of television programs to watch. However, some children especially those aged below ten years old believe that their parents know what is best for them and thus have no problem with their parents choosing for them the kind of television programs to view.

The majority of children in this study valued when their parents respected their TV viewership habits. It was clear from the interview responses that children do not want their parents/guardians telling them what not to watch on TV. When asked what they felt when their parents countered them from watching certain TV programs, 5 out of the 7 children who reported ever being countered specifically mentioned feeling quite upset about this. Describing how she feels about being countered, one child said,

- I cry [long pause] I feel so bad because I will miss out on the on-goings of the program and maybe it's my favorite program" Cynthia holding the same opinion said, "I feel very bad because mostly it's a program that I'm following so it makes me miss out some parts...(Debra)

Children also reported devising ways of maneuvering around the system when their parents deter them from accessing certain TV programs that their parents feel are not appropriate.

- ...so, if we know that she (referring to her mother) will counter us from watching a program that is about to be aired we tune into our preferred channel then we hide the remote. (Cynthia)

For one child, being countered meant that her parents cared about her wellbeing so she did not mind it. This however did not come easily, she narrated, "When I was young I used to get infuriated so much because I wanted to watch all the TV programs, but right now I know it's all to my benefit because they are the ones who know what's good for me and what's not good at all for me(Lucy)". As for Valarie, respecting her parents is very important to her, so when told not to watch certain programs on TV she does so with no hard feeling. When asked what she feels when her parents tell her not to watch certain TV programs, she said, "I do not see anything wrong with that because my dad told us that the programs that are aired after 9 p.m. are not good for us so we all go to bed at 9.p.m except my mum, dad and the house-help". It thus becomes apparent that if parents talk to their children about the nature of the programs and give valid reasons why they are countering them from watching these TV programs, the children are less likely to watch inappropriate programs on TV even when they are alone.

3.4. Factors Influencing Children's Exposure to Inappropriate TV Content

3.4.1. Leniency of the Ratings

Despite majority of the children being conversant with the TV content ratings system, they disagree with the content in some of the TV programs especially those bearing the 'PG' rating. Children are particularly worried about the amount of sexual content in most television programs that are aired during family viewership hours. Children think that the current TV shows are loaded with sexual content and foul language which according to these children is not appropriate for them. When asked whether they thought that the TV programs that are aired as from 6:00p.m to 9:00 p.m. were appropriate for them, the popular answer was 'some.' Upon further probing it was established that majority of these children thought that some soap operas rated PG were not good for them due to their content. During the time of this study soap operas rated PG were aired as from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on all leading national TV stations. Purity while talking about TV shows that are rated PG said, "Ok, when it comes to soaps there are times I find them appropriate other times I do not find them appropriate." When asked why she at times finds these soap operas inappropriate, she explained,

- There are some scenes and to be precise the intimate scenes where people start kissing on set, this is not something you would want to sit down and watch. Yes, it's part of the program but you find some scenes that even if your parent wasn't around you still feel like leaving the room for some time then come back when these scenes are done.

Other children who shared the same opinion said, "I know that stuff like kissing and some words they say in some programs such as *Mipicaddo* and *Triumph of love* (Both soap operas) are insults and I know that's not good for me" (Lucy) and "Kissing and if there is some pornography in the program" (Emily).

Majority of the children found it difficult to directly point out the sexual acts or words. A common explanation by these children as to why some soap operas were not appropriate for them was that they contained "bad things/manners". While explaining why he finds some programs on prime-time television inappropriate, Peter said, "Because they have bad things". When asked by the researcher what he meant by "bad things", he explained, "Things like kissing, hugging." Cynthia said that she finds a program inappropriate if its storyline is boring. When encouraged to explain what she meant by a boring storyline she used the example of a PG-16 rated Soap opera called *TERESA* that had ended a few weeks before the interview. She said, "For instance, if the main actor/actress has boring characters like what Teresa used to do, that was bad manners and such manners make the program boring." when asked what she meant by bad manners she said, "Things such as having many boyfriends that she kisses and hugs every time and even does bad manners like insulting other people, dressing inappropriately..."

It was a common belief among majority of the children that the current rating system needs to be revised. When asked whether they thought that content in some of the PG-Rated TV programs that they had mentioned earlier on in the interview as their favorite programs was okay for them, most of them pointed out that the sexual content and foul language needs to be revised by the implementers (KFCB).

3.4.2. Influence by Siblings

This study also established that older siblings seem to influence the younger ones on when to watch TV, what to watch on TV and how long they watch TV. When asked by the researcher whether they watch TV with their older siblings, the children unanimously

said “yes”. Upon further probing on whether there is any communication that goes on when they are watching TV as siblings and the type of communication that goes on during TV viewership, children shared;

- Unless we are talking about the storyline but talking about other issues no, she views us as general viewers. Once the program is done she does not comment but if mum is watching with us you’ll realize that there are some things she points out forcing you to actually ponder over it, but if she’s not around everyone just watches on their own. (Purity)
- No, they (older siblings) do not tell me anything about the TV program that we are watching. At times, I just feel like the program is not good for me then I leave (Emily).

Children who were aged below 18 years and had younger siblings aged below 10 years in their households documented in their diaries watching most TV programs that are aired before 9p.m. These children also documented watching these TV programs with their parents.

4. Discussion

We are living in a time when content offered over TV is not only central to shaping who we are and will be, but also to our understanding of ourselves, of others and the world around us (Vivarta, 2006). Studies have shown that TV has an enormous influence on the socio-economic development of children due to the amount of time that they spend before this medium. With more and more studies and critics accusing TV of being more adult than ever, it’s very important that children are protected from being exposed to unsuitable TV content. TV content Ratings Systems have been put in place in many different contexts as a way of preventing children’s exposure to inappropriate TV content. However, this study has revealed that even with these systems in place, children are still getting exposed to inappropriate TV content.

Children are quite knowledgeable about the TV content ratings system but they still watch TV programs that are age-inappropriate. This is majorly attributed to the leniency of the TV content ratings system in Kenya. This leniency is what previous studies have referred to as ‘Rating creep’. Ratings creep is the stretching of boundaries of what is considered acceptable in certain rating categories. Various studies have revealed that ‘ratings creep’ has occurred over the last decade and that today’s TV programs contain significantly more sexual content, violence and profanity on average than movies of the same age-based rating a decade ago (Snider, 2004; Miller, 2005; Thompson, 2005; Today, 2005; Williamson, 2009). Thus ‘rating creep’ is deeming the TV content ratings system inappropriate. This study revealed that ‘rating creep’ leads children to getting exposed to content on TV that children themselves consider inappropriate. Children therefore want TV programs to be regulated; they want some content not to be aired on prime-time TV. Although not much has been documented about children’s concern over TV content, this study has shed some light in that area. It is important for those assigning ratings to consider the fact that children given their different stages of development in society and school, are more prepared to interact with the use of certain types of TV content than others (Vivarta, 2006).

This study just like previous ones has revealed that children are watching more TV (Yalcin, Tugrul, Nacar, Tuncer, & Yurdakok, 2002; Thomas, 2011). Children’s TV viewership is unlikely to decrease as the media landscape continues to evolve and expand. As we move from analog to digital TV in Kenya, it means that children will be able to access more TV channels than before. It therefore becomes important for parents to take on the responsibility of monitoring their children’s TV usage. Prior research shows that children listen to their parents’ suggestions and follow their advice; therefore, parents have the ability to influence their children’s media habits. It would be more constructive if parents took up the responsibility of explaining why certain TV content is not good for the children, and parents should actually point out exactly what kind of content is not good for the children. Taking up this practice will enable parents to shield their children from negative effects of TV content. This will teach children critical viewing skills and help them to better understand and interpret media content that they are exposed to as well as be skeptical about the reality and the meaning of such content. Equipping children with media literacy skill is paramount in this age and time of easy access to inappropriate media content.

Media’s significant role in society calls for special attention in the context of young children in society. Media outlets especially TV interact with children in various ways and given the fact that these are young minds in the process of development, media plays a major role in shaping children’s behaviors and values. The vast majority of Kenyan families live in households with one TV set which occupies a central position, thus the widely propagated theories such as “turn off the TV and go read study or play with friends” or “the power of the remote control” are not feasible options for the overwhelming majority of Kenyan families. The government through its appropriate functions should come up with a democratic TV content ratings system that stands as a genuine system for safeguarding and protecting the fundamental rights of children. This new system should be developed not just based on parents’ report of their knowledge and perception of TV content rating system but also on children’s knowledge and perception of these ratings. The people/groups developing these ratings should have a clear understanding of the Kenyan national context.

5. Conclusion

The study has further demonstrated need for the development of a new TV content rating system in Kenya and the need for an awareness campaign to educate parents on the importance of equipping children with media literacy skills at an early age. Consequently, studies on Media effects ought to investigate more on children’s knowledge and perception of TV content ratings systems in different contexts. It is my view that the main contribution of this study to the field of Journalism is that it provides a case for a shift of focus from studies on TV content ratings systems perception to implementation of actual parental guidance in TV viewership among children.

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