

The Influence of Digital Media on Gender Stereotypes in ECD Learners: Leveraging Heavy Media Consumption by Young Children to Demystify Gender Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to demonstrate how Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers can utilize young children's exposure to digital media to deconstruct gender stereotypes, fostering positive gender identities. This qualitative study adopted a sequential exploratory research design wherein in-depth interviews with key informants (Infant teachers in charge and parents of ECD learners) were preceded by focused group discussions with ECD teachers. Content analysis was also used to explore the nature of content viewed by children in selected cartoon movies and films. The qualitative research approach adopted the purposive sampling strategy to select participants. The findings reveal the heavy consumption of media content by 21st-century young children. It revealed a vivid digital divide between girls and boys from a very tender age. Through the lens of the cultivation theory, it can be argued that characters in cartoon movies can be used to cultivate either positive or negative gender identities in young children. Gender-stereotyped identities tend to negatively affect ECD learners' schooling experiences. However, leveraging children's heavy consumption of digital media, ECD teachers can deconstruct gender stereotypical perceptions and cultivate positive self-images in ECD learners. ECD teachers are encouraged to apply gender-responsive pedagogies, leveraging the heavy consumption of digital media content by children

Key terms: Digital media, gender stereotypes, early childhood development, digital divide, Zimbabwe the authors do not have any competing interests, and the study had no funding

INTRODUCTION

Gender is an element of identity that young children struggle to understand. Young children are naturally highly impressionable, and their absorbent developing minds can be significantly influenced by media and the external environment. As children come to school, they have already developed a gender identity through varied agents, including media, and many Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers are not very sure how best to handle it [1]. If teachers are not careful, early childhood education can perpetuate gender stereotypes, limiting children's potential and reinforcing harmful gender norms. Against this backdrop, pedagogies in ECD classrooms should take a critical stance on gender stereotyping. Such an approach aims to address issues of social justice and social inclusion because the performance of femininity continues to map directly onto disparities in opportunities for boys and girls in society. The preschool years are an important developmental period when children are forming their knowledge and beliefs about how boys and girls are expected to look and act [2]. Although several studies have been conducted to demonstrate how media can perpetuate gender stereotypes in society, no studies have demonstrated how these identities can affect the schooling experiences of ECD learners. Negative gender stereotypes can significantly affect young children emotionally, socially, and even intellectually. To this end, [1] observes how the male/female gender binary remains a default perspective and suggests how a more inclusive view of the gender spectrum can enhance and inform ECD teachers' classroom practice. This study explores how gender stereotypes and expression by ECD learners influenced by exposure to digital media affect their schooling experiences. The study also sought to demonstrate how ECD teachers can leverage young children's

exposure to digital media to deconstruct gender stereotypes and create positive gender identities. It thus seeks to address issues of social justice and social inclusion as guided by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Concomitantly, the study addresses SDG5 on gender equality and women's empowerment through gender transformative ECD education. The study starts by reviewing relevant literature, then develops a theoretical framework, describes the research methodology, presents and analyses data, and lastly, proffers suggestions on how ECD teachers can leverage young children's exposure to digital media to deconstruct gender stereotypical perceptions in ECD learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, the majority of young children have access to electronic media where they watch children's films and cartoons. Although young children in Africa have historically lagged in terms of access to technology and technology because of the digital divide [3] [4] [5], they have started having more exposure to digital media. Thus, the influence of media and technology in the 21st century on gender stereotypes in young children need not be overemphasized. As already alluded to, of interest to this study is how gender stereotypes may affect the schooling experiences of ECD learners. A global perspective highlights that technology and media significantly influence the development of gender identity in very young children, often perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes through the content they consume, which can impact their perceptions of what it means to be a boy or girl, potentially limiting their future aspirations and choices [6] [7]. To educators, this issue is particularly concerning due to the early age at which children are exposed to digital media. Researchers have generally found that there are fewer female characters than male characters in children's films and cartoons shown on television or other electronic media [7] [8] [9]. In most cases, female characters are portrayed as talking less than male characters, and characters tend to be shown expressing gender stereotyped behaviours.

The Normative Script of Gender Identities in Electronic Media

Digital media, like any other media, tend to portray a gender normative script aligned to societal expectations. According to cognitive and social learning theories, children interpret information about male and female characters on television and map those observations onto their mental models of what it means to be a boy or a girl [10] [2]. In that process, children acquire a gender identity by forming stereotyped expectations about the activities, personal attributes, and roles associated with each gender. Sandra Bem developed the Gender Schema Theory in 1981, which is a cognitive theory that explains how children learn about gender roles and how these roles shape their behaviour [2] [11]. According to this theory, children actively construct mental representations or schemas of what defines men and women, and these schemas are incorporated into the self-concept. These mental models, known as gender schemas, guide how children perceive and interpret information in the environment [2]. As children incorporate more gender stereotypes into their schemas, they become more likely to seek out information (through digital media) consistent with their existing views and to avoid discrepant information [2]. By implication, the 21st-century child's gender attributes are more likely to be influenced by exposure to the content of electronic media. It is thus the intent of this study to explore how these gender schemas affect the schooling experiences of ECD learners and suggest strategies to deconstruct gender stereotypical perceptions.

Many studies have shown that young boys and girls have differential access to media and technology [6] [12] [13]. Differential access to digital media may result in differential socialisation between boys and girls, which may, in turn, lead to differential schooling experiences and academic performance. Moreover, digital media may help shape norms both directly, through individual models, and indirectly, through their impact on the values that parents, peers, and teachers adopt and transmit [14]. Analyses of diverse types of television programming that target youth consistently find that boys and men outnumber girls and women, with boys/men typically comprising approximately 60% or more of characters [6]. Further analyses indicate that men are more often placed in the world of work and women in the home; when women are shown in the workplace, their occupations tend to align with gender stereotypes [12].

Given young children's high rates of media consumption and the stereotypical nature of many media portrayals, a central concern has been that heavy exposure to these depictions contributes to a greater acceptance of gender

stereotypes among young viewers [15] [16]. The more accessible certain schemas are in memory, the greater the likelihood that they will be used to guide perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors for the young learners. Therefore, frequent exposure to television's gender stereotypes is believed to activate stereotypical gender schemas, which may influence subsequent self-perceptions regarding femininity and masculinity. Several research studies have revealed strong effects of stereotypical media portrayals on children's gendered toy and playmate preferences [17] [18]. Across studies, exposure to stereotypical content reinforced gender-typed assumptions.

Cartoon movies are very popular with young children. When cartoon movies are examined, it is seen that the number of male characters is more than females. The reason for male characters being higher than females is that cartoons are mostly viewed by boys [19]. Generally, female characters are less than males in cartoon movies; they are shown less on screen, they do not have the leader role frequently, they are not very active, they have fewer responsibilities, they are less bouncing and much more childish than males [13]. More frequently, mothers are portrayed working at home alone, and men do not interfere with housework. Girls are shown doing activities like cheerleaders do, and the activities are mimicked by dogs and pets [18] [19]. It has also been observed that male characters are given more importance in cartoon movies. Further, male characters are shown as being more skilled, leading, able to express ideas, threatening, and furious than females. On the contrary, female characters are shown as being more compassionate, in need of protection, and busy with ordinary things than male characters" [13]. Women's representation at low status especially reveals itself in the job they do. Many more studies have shown that many female characters in cartoon movies are reflected either as sexual objects or as being unemployed [19]. Very few of them have jobs, and these are generally the ones carried out within the house and perceived as insignificant. Generally, female characters are reflected as housewives, mothers, girlfriends, grandmothers, aunts, evil men's daughters, maids, nannies, nurses, teachers, secretaries, waitresses, singers, movie stars, TV reporters, circus members and member and wizards [19]. Because of the highly impressionable nature of young children, their reality is more likely to be shaped by what they consume in cartoon movies. They are more likely to develop either feminine or masculine attributes consistent with what they watch in children's cartoons and films.

In the contemporary world, the media has become an important tool to foster the required behaviors and values among children [18]. Eron, as cited in [19], claims that cartoon programs are not only a source of fun for child viewers but also serve to educate them. Perceptions of female characters in cartoons by girls is a reflection of the conventional gender role model. In many of the cartoon movies, "female characters are domestic, they play with dolls, wear pretty clothes, and fancy up and run after boys" [20]. Further, female characters in cartoon movies do housework, are very kind, and apologize very frequently. By implication, cartoon movies tend to cultivate stereotyped feminine or masculine identities consistent with societal expectations. Thus, innocent cartoon characters convey many hidden messages that can be negative or positive for children. One such negative message is related to the portrayal of gender, as the roles assigned to characters are based on the stereotypes existing in society.

Batool et al. [17] observe that gender depiction in children's animated movies deserves much attention as the children start spending a lot of time viewing animated movies and cartoons at a very early stage. As it has already been argued, television content plays a major role in conveying certain messages on gender identities to children [20]. Children are well aware of the gender cataloging in animated movies. The gender role depictions shown in animated movies may influence children's views, ideologies, beliefs, concepts, and opinions about norms, relationships, social behaviors, and gender [2] [21].

The literature argued for the powerful role of digital media as a dominant source of social inspiration and influence on an individual's gender perceptions [17]. Furthermore, traditional or customary ideas of gender construction or representation were found to have higher and heavier exposure to digital media.

From a feminist standpoint, digital media have been considered central social 'players' in shaping children's gender identities. According to this argument, the media, and the television in particular, present images of femininities and masculinities that do not simply reflect 'natural' sex differences but actively participate in the symbolic discourse of gender, a discourse that is rooted in power relations [17]. Children's cartoons and films confirm and reinforce the 'otherization' of a feminine identity, relegating it to the periphery where girls and women are perceived as less important by society. It is this compromised feminine identity that may

cultivate low self-esteem in girls and subsequently obstruct active participation by little girls in ECD classrooms. This perspective is grounded in the belief that digital media plays a crucial role in shaping societal norms and values, particularly regarding gender [21]. By critically examining the media, feminists seek to uncover the power dynamics that influence media production and consumption and advocate for more equitable representations and practices

Theoretical Framework

To understand how young children acquire a gender identity through digital media, the study is informed by the theory of cultivation analysis propounded by George Gerbner in the 1960s and Bandura's 2001 social cognitive theory. From the word "cultivation," the theory assumes that digital media cultivates or creates a worldview that, although possibly inaccurate, becomes the reality because people believe it to be so [18]. By extension, we argue that the content of digital media cultivates masculine and feminine identities in young boys and girls, respectively, consistent with societal expectations. In doing so, digital media tend to present a mediated reality. We also argue that it is this mediated reality on masculinity and femininity that may influence differential schooling experiences of ECD learners. The perceived reality constitutes gender stereotypes, which may obstruct effective learning in ECD classrooms. Thus, the repeated exposure to stereotyped behaviours and roles cultivates personalities in young viewers consistent with cultural and societal expectations. Digital media's influence is gradual and steady, but ultimately creates a major effect on gender identities [22]. It happens more forcefully if young children watch the same trends that they see in their families and societies (Gerbner in [2]). Thus, children's cartoons and films can influence their thoughts, attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors, cultivating stereotyped gender identities. As kids start watching cartoons from a very young age, these programmes start affecting them gradually. From a cultivation theory standpoint, it can be assumed that what young children watch in cartoons and films will eventually cultivate their minds with the patterns and trends shown through cartoon programmes. In the same vein, the Gender schema theory proposes that the ideas we have about gender (our schema) are shaped through the culture in which we live [2]. As children at this age are very impressionable, the two theories assume that they will act, think, and behave in the same manner as they observe on screen. What they observe on the screen is a reflection of societal expectations and culture.

To create a robust synthesis on how children acquire a gender identity, Bandura's 2001 social cognitive theory is used to complement the cultivation theory. This theory proposes that viewers' scripts, schemas, and normative beliefs are shaped by their engagement with and cognitions about media content and that these beliefs guide their subsequent behavior [2]. However, exposure alone does not guarantee that the values or behaviors viewed will be adopted; instead, this adoption depends on characteristics of the content and cognitions of the viewer. The likelihood of learning and modeling specific behaviors viewed is believed to depend on factors such as the attractiveness of or identification with media models, the salience of their actions, and the rewards or punishments experienced by the models for their behavior [2]. If the model is perceived as similar to the viewer, as realistic, or as having admirable qualities (e.g., popularity), then there is a greater likelihood that the model's behavior will be emulated. In other words, there is the likelihood that the media content will cultivate a gender identity consistent with children's lived experiences.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent are young children (4-8 years old) exposed to digital media?
- How do digital media influence stereotyped gender identities in young children?
- How do stereotyped gender identities affect the schooling experiences of ECD children?
- What strategies can be employed by ECD teachers to deconstruct stereotyped gender identities in young children?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative study adopted a sequential exploratory research design wherein in-depth interviews with key

informants (Infant school teachers in charge and parents of ECD learners) were preceded by focused group discussions with Early Childhood Development teachers. Content analysis was also used to explore the nature of content viewed by children in selected cartoon movies and films. The qualitative research approach guided the process of collecting, presenting, and analysing data on the influence of digital media on stereotyped gender identities for young children. The approach allowed an in-depth exploration of the experiences, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of the research participants [23] on the nuances and complexities of the socialisation process through digitally cultivating stereotyped identities in young viewers. It allowed deep insights into learning challenges and limitations experienced by ECD learners as a result of restrictive and prescriptive gender stereotypes cultivated through watching children's cartoon movies and films. Content analysis, focused group discussions, and in-depth interviews allowed multiple voices to be heard, provided a more holistic picture of the research issue being investigated, and allowed for triangulation of data for reliability and trustworthiness as data from different sources can be compared and any inconsistencies followed upon. Data from multiple sources provides means to develop defendable conclusions on the impact of digital media on ECD learners' gender identity and how such mediated identities affect the schooling experiences of young learners. The triangulation of different data collection methods in a single study is a strategy to add rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to the inquiry.

The collected data are available upon request from the authors

Sampling

Participants for this study were identified mostly through the purposive sampling strategy. Participants were selected based on their lived experiences concerning the research issue [24], which in this case involved working and living with children in the range of 0-8 years old. Twelve ECD teachers were selected based on their vast experience working with infants or ECD learners. The teachers were drawn from four primary schools in the Ep-Mafara district in the Harare metropolitan. Ten parents with children attending ECD classes were selected based on their being readily available and accessible. Four infant school Teachers in Charge were purposively sampled, one from each school. The sample thus comprised 26 research participants. We also purposively sampled popular Western and African cartoon movies whose content either reinforces gender stereotypes or deconstructs gender stereotypical perceptions and attitudes.

Data Collection Methods

In-depth Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

In-depth interviews were held with teachers in charge (TICs) of infant schools and parents with children in infant classes. The purpose of the key informant interviews was to get in-depth insights into the ECD learners' challenges and limitations that arise as a result of mediated gender stereotypes through digital media. In-depth interviews also explored insights into gender responsive pedagogies that can be applied to deconstruct gender stereotypical perceptions in ECD learners. The in-depth interviews followed up on some issues raised in focus group discussions with ECD teachers that needed further clarification. We also sought insights into the possibility of leveraging young children's heavy consumption of media to cultivate positive gender identities in ECD learners.

Participatory Focus Group Discussion

Focus group discussions were conducted with experienced ECD teachers from the four selected schools. The discussion sought to leverage the teachers' vast experience to understand how media content can cultivate gender stereotyped identities, which affect the schooling experiences of ECD learners. We had two FGDs, with six members in each group. We also sought insights into the possibility of developing gender responsive pedagogies through digital media.

More data were collected through content analysis of selected cartoon movies to demonstrate how media content mediates gender stereotypical attitudes and behaviors of the highly impressionable young children.

Data Analysis

The study adopted an interpretive analysis model, which helped in establishing emerging patterns or themes from the collected data. Gall [25] and Cohen [26] describe interpretive analysis as the process of examining a case study closely to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied. Braun and Clarke [27] elaborate that a theme captures something important about the data about the research question. We thus analysed the data set collected through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and content analysis, and then coded the data that addressed specific research questions or emerging themes.

Ethical consideration

The study sought informed consent from research participants, and the informed consent form was completed by the participants. In this regard, before every interview, we explained to the participants the purpose of the study, its benefits to teaching and learning, and how long each interview would take. We also explained that participating in the interviews was entirely voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw at any stage. We also ensured the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. To protect the anonymity of research participants, we generalised responses by the participants and used data aggregates and job titles. We declare that all the necessary declarations were observed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings of the study confirm the heavy consumption of media content by young children as they spend most of their time at home watching cartoon movies and films on cellphones and television sets. The content of children's movies and films has been observed to portray masculine and feminine characters that reinforce gender stereotypes consistent with societal expectations. Since young children's minds are highly impressionable, heavy exposure to digital media can easily cultivate mediated gender stereotypes that compromise their schooling experiences. However, ECD teachers can leverage on young children's heavy exposure to digital media and contrive gender responsive pedagogies that allow the realization of Sustainable Development Goal 4, whose thrust is on inclusive, equitable, quality education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The presented data were derived from in-depth interviews with ECD teachers and parents and content analysis of selected cartoon movies and films. Generally, media as an agent of secondary socialisation tends to mediate gender identity, which can affect ECD learners either positively or negatively.

ECD Learners' Exposure to Digital Media

Although the digital divide remains a reality in Africa, there is evidence that young children in this 21st century have begun to be characterized by heavy consumption of media content through electronic gadgets like cellphones and television sets. Interviews with parents revealed that young children spend most of their time watching cartoon movies and films. One parent had this to say:

My daughter is in ECD A class (the first entry point in school, usually for four-year-olds). When she is at home, she is always hooked on the screen, watching cartoon movies and films. During the times when we don't have electricity, she either takes my phone or her dad's phone or searches for sites that show cartoons and movies. I think she has developed an addiction to media and technology.

Another parent shared her experiences and sentiments:

My son, who is in ECD B, rarely goes out to play with friends. He is always glued to the screen watching cartoon movies. At times, he watches movies on his cellphone. I have also observed that even when we are travelling, he makes sure he grabs a cell phone to watch a movie. The addiction is just too much.

Had it not been that we had a rule to say no cell phone when eating, he would be eating while watching a movie on the phone.

An interview with another parent confirmed the heavy consumption of media content by today's young children. He said:

My child's addiction to technology is just too much. We have gone to the extent of removing a television set in his room because he would sleep late into the night every day, watching cartoon movies. At times, he sneaks into the sitting room to watch a movie at a very low volume when everyone else is asleep.

Parents also confirmed that boys have more access to media and technology than girls. One parent shared her observations:

I have a set of twins, a boy and girl, who are five years old and doing ECD B. The girl spends much of her the playing with her dolls, or she is always following me wherever I go. The boy is either on the screen watching cartoon movies or on the phone playing video games. He enjoys narrating the movie story and imitating the characters in the movie.

A young parent shared her experiences with her only daughter:

My daughter has little interest in watching movies. It's either that she is working in the kitchen with me or she is playing house with friends. Very rarely, she requests to watch her favourite movie, PJ Masks.

The interview excerpts above reveal the heavy consumption of media content by the 21st-century young children. They also reveal a vivid digital divide between girls and boys from a very tender age. These findings corroborate with findings from a study by [28], which revealed that screen time (i.e., time spent on any digital or electronic screens) – including television, computers, smartphones, tablets, and video games – has become an integral part of modern life. This is especially the case for children who, having grown up surrounded by digital media and screen entertainment, are often described as 'digital natives' [29]. Similarly, a study by Walsh and Leaper [6] in the United Kingdom corroborates that media and technology used by young children have become so pervasive that the greater part of children's waking day is spent glued to media screens.

Although TV viewing remains the most common screen-based activity among children, as technology has advanced, a growing range of electronic media devices has become available [28]. There has been an increase in children's ownership and use of such devices over the past decade, beginning at an increasingly young age of one and a half years. In developed countries like the UK, it has been reported that children spend more time with electronic media (TV, video games, and Internet) than with any other activity [30] [28]. On a typical day, UK children and young people reported spending an average of 2.5 hours on a computer/laptop/tablet, 3 hours on their phone, and 2 hours watching TV. Other studies have reported that children spend around 8 hours of their daily waking hours on screen-based activities. Despite the digital divide between Africa and the developed world, children in developing countries are assuming the same trajectory characterized by heavy consumption of media content [18]. Young children in Africa, as is the case in the developed world, can thus be aptly described as the 'digital natives'. Such heavy consumption of media content tends to mediate gender stereotypes that may differentially affect schooling experiences of boys and girls in ECD classrooms.

The influence of Digital Media on ECD learners' Gender Identities.

Normally, the themes and storyline for the cartoon movies do not deviate from the normative script of societal expectations. An analysis of the few selected cartoon movies shows that male characters are often depicted as strong, emotionally restrained, risk-taking leaders, and are more likely to be shown in leadership positions. On the other hand, female characters are portrayed as emotionally charged, needing support from men, submissive, virtuous, and primarily concerned with beauty.

In the cartoon movie, Mickey Mouse and the Roadster Racers, female characters like Daisy and Minnie are often shown in caregiver roles while male characters engage in adventurous activities. Similarly, through content analysis, one can observe that Disney Princess movies such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty

frequently depict female characters in traditionally submissive roles, while male characters are portrayed as powerful. In the same vein, the Beauty and the Beast movie often perpetuates stereotypical gender roles with women as nurturing caregivers and men as brave rescuers. In another cartoon movie, Aladdin, Jasmine is portrayed as a beautiful, obedient princess in need of rescue. As already alluded, the media is a very powerful tool that can shape the way young children see themselves. Watching the aforementioned movies is more likely to shape feminine and masculine attributes for girls and boys, respectively.

Further content analysis shows that there is a paradigm shift towards challenging traditional stereotypical roles and portraying female characters positively in modern cartoon movies. Some modern children's cartoon movies and films strive to challenge and subvert traditional gender stereotypes. For example, the Disney Pixar film features a strong, independent female protagonist who defied the traditional princess norms. Another good example is the Moana cartoon movie which tells the story of a brave, adventurous young woman who challenges traditional gender, roles, and expectations. Similarly, the cartoon movie called 'Frozen', Anna and Elsa are portrayed as characters who challenge gender stereotypes. ECD teachers should leverage such movies to deconstruct gender stereotypes in young children.

Some African cartoon movies and animations portray gender stereotypes, often reflecting traditional, cultural, and societal norms. For example, South Africa's Takalani Sesame (2000) has some episodes that feature traditional gender roles, such as women caring for children and men working outside the home. Similarly, Nigeria's 'Bino and Fino. 2010 is an animated series that aims to promote African culture and values. Further analysis reveals that some episodes reflect traditional gender roles, such as women cooking and cleaning while men engage in outdoor activities. Generally, African cultures and traditions often influence the portrayal of gender roles in cartoons and animations, reflecting societal norms and expectations. However, as is the case with Western movies, some current African cartoon movies and animations depict girls positively. For example, Afrokids (2019), an animated series that promotes diversity, inclusivity, social justice, and gender equality, featuring strong independent female characters. ECD teachers should thus make deliberate efforts to expose learners to cartoon movies that portray positive gender identities for both boys and girls.

An interview with one TIC corroborates findings from content analysis:

The media is a secondary agent of socialisation. It reinforces societal expectations, which include gender norms. At this tender age, young children are highly impressionable and have an absorbent mind. They can be easily influenced by what they watch in movies. They tend to identify themselves with characters in the movie based on gender.

Another TIC from another school elaborated:

We need to be careful with what our children watch in cartoon movies and films because what they see is what they become. A negative gender identity affects the children's self-concept and this has grave ramifications on their schooling experiences.

The following sentiments were shared by one ECD teacher in the FGD:

The power of the media is shown by children's addiction. Children's reality is shaped by their lived experiences, which include watching movies. In this regard, media and technology can mediate children's gender identity in line with societal expectations.

Through the lens of the cultivation theory, it is argued that characters in cartoon movies can be used to cultivate either positive or negative gender identities in young children. Media and technology have the potential to cultivate or create a worldview that although possibly inaccurate, becomes the reality because people believe it to be so [18]. Technology media thus cultivates masculine and feminine identities in young boys and girls, respectively, consistent with societal expectations. Children's reality is cultivated by what they watch in movies. According to Bem's (1981) gender schema theory, children create a cognitive schema of gender that they derive from the norms of their culture [33], in this case, the norms of the children's culture are portrayed in the content of the media they watch.

From Bandura's 2001 social cognitive theory standpoint, viewers' scripts, schemas, and normative beliefs are shaped by their engagement with and cognitions about media content, and these beliefs guide their subsequent behavior [33]. The likelihood of learning and modeling specific behaviors viewed is believed to depend on factors such as the attractiveness of or identification with media models. Social Cognitive Theory posits that a character's behavior is more likely to be imitated if exposure is repeated [31][32]. According to [15], women's underrepresentation in media falsely imply that women are less important and invisible. Characters in cartoon movies model appropriate feminine or masculine behaviours, which are then imitated by girls and boys, respectively. By implication, gender identities in young children develop as they identify themselves with certain characters in cartoon movies. It can thus be argued that as ECD children come to school, they would have already developed a gender identity through movies and the teacher's role is to ensure a positive gender identity for all learners.

Gender Responsive Pedagogies through Digital Media in ECD Classrooms

Gender transformative education in ECD classrooms remains critical in the realisation of SDGs 4 and 5. Taking cognisance of the highly impressionable nature of young children, deconstructing gender stereotypes at this stage becomes an inescapable responsibility for ECD teachers. When asked how they could use cartoon movies to deconstruct gender stereotypes, one teacher during a focus group session said:

ECD teachers may use cartoon movies as a teaching approach. After playing the movie, she can proceed to identify gender stereotypical roles and how they disadvantage one gender. In the next lesson, she can play a movie where male characters are portrayed working in the kitchen or performing the traditionally perceived feminine roles. This helps to deconstruct stereotypical perceptions, attitudes and beliefs.

A follow-up interview with one TIC reveals:

Parents should work together with teachers. They should be encouraged to censor what children watch on cellphones and televisions. Media content laden with gender stereotypes can influence whom children become. The content of the media is very powerful in changing the character of children. Showing cartoon movies that reverse that traditional gender stereotypes becomes of paramount importance.

The teacher's role involves selecting appropriate content that promotes gender equality. Young girls' self-perceptions can be transformed by using modern cartoons that depict female characters performing the traditionally perceived masculine roles, like leadership roles or driving heavy trucks.

One ECD teacher in FGD shared her experience:

One day during free play time, I observed five learners acting a movie they had watched at home. Interestingly, all girls assumed roles of feminine characters and boys assumed roles of the dominant masculine characters. I took an opportunity to reverse the roles of characters and allowed girls to assume dominant roles as well. The result was awesome as the girls enjoyed giving orders to the boys.

Another ECD teacher in another FGD shared her observations:

During story time, I have observed that more boys than girls are ready to tell stories. Most of the stories they tell are related to the cartoon movies they watched at home. Thus, boys demonstrate high proficiency in language use acquired through watching cartoons and films. More importantly, boys tend to be sociable and more emotionally stable than girls. Generally, girls lag in terms of language, social, and emotional development as a result of differential access to media and technology.

In an interview with an experienced TIC elaborated:

Media is a powerful agent of socialized. Generally, children become what they see in movies. They can easily identify with characters in movies; consequently, their gender identities are formed during this

socialisation process. Girls tend to lag in the different development domains because of differential access to media between boys and girls

Gender transformative ECD education through media and technology becomes indispensable. ECD teachers should apply gender responsive pedagogies leveraging on the heavy consumption of media content by young children. It also becomes inevitable to adapt and adopt developmentally appropriate curricula materials that are gender sensitive. Through the flipped classroom approach, ECD teachers can reverse the traditional gender stereotypes that affect the schooling experiences of the girl child. The flipped classroom approach is an active student-centred approach that maximises student participation by exposing students to learning content before the actual lesson [34] [36]. In this case, the ultimate goal is to deconstruct gender stereotypes and realize the SDGs 4 and 5. Some modern cartoon movies and films have begun to portray the girl child positively [35]. Teachers should then make a deliberate effort to expose young children to cartoon movies that portray both girls and boys as adventurous, creative, and courageous. By extension, there has to be deliberate effort to re-write the script and portray both boys and girls positively. As already alluded to, children from the age of 3 to 8 are highly impressionable [19], reversing gender stereotypical perceptions through media and technology shouldn't be a mammoth task for ECD teachers. Gender stereotypes associated with femininity and masculinity tend to affect the schooling experiences of ECD learners. A negative gender self-concept affects confidence, motivation, and participation in class, leading to a lag in all development domains for ECD learners. Gender responsive pedagogies in the form of role-plays and drama played through media should aim to address the traditional gender stereotypes that portray the female characters as less competent and always in need of support from men.

CONCLUSIONS

The 21st young children, even in tend to be characterized by heavy consumption of digital media content. In many of the cartoon movies, female characters are domestic; they play with dolls, wear pretty clothes and fancy up, and they are very kind and apologize very frequently. On the other hand, male characters are portrayed as brave, adventurous, and occupy leadership roles. Digital media tend to portray gender stereotyped traditional roles, which affect young children's self-perception. Gender stereotyped identities tend to affect ECD learners' schooling experiences. Because of the highly impressionable nature of young children, they easily adopt gender identities consistent with what they see in movies. However, there seems to be a paradigm shift where modern cartoon movies portray female characters defying traditional gender norms. ECD teachers should thus leverage young children's heavy consumption of media content and expose learners to content that deconstructs gender stereotypes. Against this backdrop, gender-responsive pedagogies through digital media in ECD classrooms become inevitable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes the following recommendations:

1. ECD teachers are encouraged to apply gender-responsive pedagogies through digital media to deconstruct gender stereotypical perceptions in ECD learners.
2. ECD teachers should leverage young children's heavy consumption of digital media content and expose them to modern cartoon movies that demystify traditional gender roles.
3. ECD Teachers should work with parents to monitor what children watch in digital media.
4. Schools are encouraged to develop a policy framework on gender transformative education for infant classes.

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