Parental Awareness on the Language of Animated Cartoons Consumed by Children in Tanzania

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Abstract: *In an era where children increasingly consume animated content through television and digital platforms, concerns have risen about the language embedded in these cartoons and its potential influence on young viewers. This study examined parents' and guardians' awareness of the language used in animated cartoons watched by their children in Dodoma City, Tanzania. A qualitative case study design was adopted, guided by Social Learning Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis. The paper purposively involved 15 parents/guardians. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with parents, and document analysis of selected cartoons. Thematic analysis was conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis procedures to uncover hidden ideologies, linguistic choices, and parental interpretations. Findings revealed that most parents were unaware of the linguistic content and hidden messages embedded in cartoons their children watched, often assuming that all animated content is safe and educational. This lack of critical engagement left children exposed to potentially inappropriate language and ideologies. The study recommends structured parental guidance, media literacy programs, and policy frameworks to support parents in evaluating cartoon content to safeguard children's sociolinguistic development.*

Keywords: *Parental awareness; Animated cartoons; Children; Language content; Media influence.*

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1. Introduction

Animated cartoons have become a dominant form of children's entertainment globally, driven by the rapid expansion of television networks and digital streaming platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, and Disney+ (Rideout, 2023). Research in Europe and North America has highlighted both the educational potential and the risks of such content when consumed without adult guidance. For instance, in Sweden, Livingstone et al. (2017) found that 78% of parents co-viewed television content with their children and discussed its language to ensure cultural appropriateness. Similarly, in Germany, Götz and Lemish (2022) reported that parents often apply age-rating systems and language filters on digital platforms, which significantly reduces children's exposure to inappropriate vocabulary.

In the United States, Nathanson (2015) observed that active parental mediation, where parents watch and discuss cartoons with their children helps them question and reject inappropriate expressions. Likewise, in Canada, Steeves (2020) found that parental involvement in children's media use improved critical language awareness, helping children distinguish between fictional exaggeration and real-life speech norms. These examples show that in many Western countries, parental awareness is central to regulating the linguistic environment children are exposed to.

In contrast, many African countries face challenges in parental media engagement due to limited digital literacy and competing economic priorities. In South Africa, Chuma and Chasi (2019) noted that most parents lack the skills to evaluate the linguistic content of animated cartoons, despite their wide availability. In Nigeria, Adeyemi (2021) found that only 32% of surveyed parents knew the language used in their children's cartoons, and most assumed they were safe because they were marketed as for children. Such patterns highlight a regional concern about uncritical acceptance of children's media content.

In East Africa, rising internet access has expanded children's unsupervised exposure to foreign cartoons (GSMA, 2023). In Kenya, Mwaura (2021) showed that children readily adopt English slang and sarcasm from cartoons, while parents rarely intervene or discuss language content. In Uganda, Nyongesa and Oduor (2022) found that parental assumptions that "all cartoons are educational" meant that inappropriate linguistic expressions went unchallenged.

In Tanzania, only 42.4% of children are enrolled in pre-primary education (ACEI, 2016), meaning many spend long hours at home, often watching cartoons unsupervised. While locally produced content like *Akili and Me* has shown positive effects on language development (University of Maryland, 2017), most children also access foreign content on YouTube, which may contain slang, sarcasm, innuendo, or ideologies inappropriate to their cultural context. Saki (2025) found that most parents in Dodoma City assumed all cartoons used good language, rarely monitoring or discussing their content with their children.

Despite growing access to foreign media, little empirical research has examined Tanzanian parents' awareness of the language their children encounter in cartoons. Existing studies focus on educational benefits of cartoons but overlook parental monitoring and its role in preventing exposure to inappropriate expressions. This gap makes it crucial to study parental awareness in Dodoma City, Tanzania's rapidly growing capital with high digital access among children (TCRA, 2024). Understanding parental awareness in this context is vital to design interventions that support positive language development and protect children from potentially unsuitable linguistic influences.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Children in Tanzania, like in many parts of the world, are increasingly exposed to animated cartoons through television, smartphones, and internet platforms. While these media can support early learning, they also contain fast-paced English dialogues, slang, sarcasm, and hidden ideological messages that children may adopt uncritically, influencing their language use and social behavior. Yet, most parents and guardians assume that all cartoons are safe and educational, and rarely examine or discuss the language their children are exposed to. In response to growing concerns about children's media content, Tanzania has introduced initiatives such as the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) content guidelines, and the Education and Training Policy (ETP, 2014), which emphasize parental involvement in children's early learning and language development. However, these efforts have focused mainly on limiting harmful content and promoting educational media, without addressing parental media literacy or awareness of the actual language used in cartoons. The lack of empirical data on parental awareness represents a major gap, especially in urban areas like Dodoma where children have high exposure to digital media. This paper addresses this gap by examining the extent of parents' and guardians' awareness of the language used in the animated cartoons their children watch in Dodoma City.

1.3 Objective of the Paper

The objective of this paper is to examine parents' and guardians' awareness of the language used in the animated cartoons their children watch in Dodoma City, Tanzania. Specifically, it seeks to explore parents' perceptions, monitoring practices, and ability to identify linguistic expressions, slang, or hidden messages contained in these cartoons.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Empirical Review

Globally, several recent studies have examined parental awareness of children's media content. Nikken and Schols (2022), in a cross-national study across the Netherlands, Germany, and the UK, found that while 84% of parents believed they actively monitored their children's screen use, only 29% actually reviewed the language content of media programs, including cartoons. They concluded that many parents overestimate their awareness, creating gaps in identifying inappropriate expressions. Similarly, Steeves (2023) reported that Canadian parents with higher digital literacy were more likely to discuss cartoon language, slang, and sarcasm with their children, which fostered critical language awareness and reduced passive consumption.

In Africa, studies continue to reveal low parental engagement. In Nigeria, Adeyemi (2021) examined 420 households and found that 68% of parents allowed children to choose their own digital content and assumed cartoons were safe, while only 15% could recall specific language

or expressions their children used from cartoons. This shows widespread unawareness of linguistic influences. In South Africa, Chuma and Chasi (2019) found that despite high screen exposure among children, 72% of parents lacked strategies to monitor cartoon language and often misunderstood culturally embedded slang or innuendos. They warned that this lack of linguistic oversight can affect children's speech and behavior development.

In East Africa, Mwaura (2021) reported that Kenyan children frequently used English slang and sarcastic expressions copied from animated series like *Teen Titans Go!* and *SpongeBob SquarePants*, while parents perceived such shows as purely educational. Likewise, Nyongesa and Oduor (2022) in Uganda found that parents rarely discussed the language used in cartoons, assuming all content marketed as for children was suitable, which allowed inappropriate expressions to go unnoticed.

In Tanzania, research is limited but emerging. A quasi-experiment by the University of Maryland (2017) demonstrated that children who watched the educational cartoon *Akili and Me* with parental guidance achieved significantly higher gains in vocabulary and counting than those who watched alone, showing the benefit of guided viewing.

The analysis of literature indicates that studies have focused broadly on screen-time regulation and educational effects of cartoons, while few have specifically explored parental or guardian awareness of the language used in cartoons. Even the few Tanzanian studies have emphasized learning outcomes rather than parents' ability to identify, interpret, or discuss the language their children are exposed to. This leaves a critical gap in understanding parental awareness, especially in rapidly growing urban areas like Dodoma where digital access among children is high. This study addresses this gap by focusing on parents' awareness of the language content in animated cartoons their children watch.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This study was anchored on Social Learning Theory (SLT) propounded by Albert Bandura (1977)**.** SLT posits that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and modeling**.** Children pay attention to models, whether real people or fictional characters, retain what they observe, and reproduce those behaviors or language when motivated. The theory emphasizes vicarious reinforcement, where individuals are more likely to adopt behaviors or speech they see rewarded in others. Within the context of animated cartoons, SLT suggests that children can acquire new vocabulary, expressions, or communication styles simply

by watching and imitating their favorite characters. This makes parental presence and oversight important in helping children interpret and evaluate what they watch.

In addition, the paper drew on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough (1989, 2001)**.** CDA views language as a form of social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations, ideologies, and social identities. It assumes that every discourse carries implicit values and cultural assumptions that can influence how audiences perceive themselves and others. By critically examining language used in media texts, CDA exposes hidden meanings, stereotypes, and ideological messages embedded in seemingly neutral content like children's cartoons. This framework helped the study to analyze not just the words children hear, but also the underlying cultural and ideological implications that parents may or may not recognize.

The two theories complement each other in explaining both the process and content of children's learning from cartoons. While SLT explains how children internalize language through observational learning**,** CDA reveals what kind of language and ideologies are being internalized**.** Combining these perspectives allowed the study to examine the dual issue at the heart of the research objective: (1) how cartoon language can shape children's linguistic behavior and (2) how parents' limited awareness may leave children unprotected from inappropriate or value-laden language. Together, these theories underscore the need for informed parental mediation to guide children's media experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to allow an in-depth understanding of parents' and guardians' awareness of the language used in animated cartoons their children watch. According to Yin (2014), a case study design is appropriate for investigating a phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables the collection of rich, descriptive data on participants' personal beliefs, perceptions, and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design was particularly suited to the study objective, which sought to capture subjective parental awareness rather than measure numerical outcomes. It allowed the researcher to engage directly with parents in their natural settings, which enhanced the contextual relevance of the findings.

3.2 Sampling Techniques and Procedures

The study used purposive and homogeneous sampling techniques to recruit participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study objective. A total of 15 parents/guardians who had children aged between 5 and 14 years and who were known to allow their children to watch animated cartoons were purposively selected. This approach ensured that only individuals with direct experience in supervising children's media use were included, thereby increasing the likelihood of obtaining meaningful and relevant data. Homogeneous sampling further ensured that the participants shared similar characteristics being parents/guardians of young children exposed to cartoons, which created a focused and comparable sample for exploring awareness patterns. This sampling strategy was ideal for the paper's objective because it targeted individuals most likely to provide informed perspectives on cartoon language exposure.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Two main data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews and documentary review.

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with all 15 parents/guardians using an interview guide with open-ended questions. This method was chosen because it allows participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions while giving the researcher flexibility to probe emerging themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili, in 30 to 45 minutes, recorded with consent, and later transcribed. This method directly captured parents' awareness levels, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the language used in the cartoons their children watch, which is central to the study objective. All interviews were conducted in private settings convenient to participants. Parental consent was obtained before including them in the study.

3.3.2 Documentary Review

Selected animated cartoons commonly accessed by children (including *Akili and Me*, *Aikane*, and *In a Heartbeat*) were reviewed and analyzed for linguistic content, such as vocabulary, slang, sarcasm, and implicit cultural messages. This method allowed the researcher to cross-check what parents said they knew with the actual content children were exposed to. The benefit of this approach was that it provided objective evidence of the language features in cartoons, which complemented the subjective perceptions gathered from interviews and helped assess the accuracy of parental awareness.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources (interviews and documentary review), which allowed comparison of parental reports against actual media content. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to verify accuracy. Peer debriefing with academic supervisors further helped refine emerging codes and interpretations, reducing researcher bias. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail of field notes and interview transcripts, while confirmability was promoted by maintaining reflexive notes to document researcher assumptions. These measures collectively enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using Fairclough's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Interview transcripts and documentary review notes were first transcribed and repeatedly read to gain familiarity. Initial codes were generated to capture key ideas related to parental awareness, assumptions about cartoon language, and patterns of oversight. Codes were then clustered into themes guided by the study objective. CDA was used to interrogate the linguistic features of the cartoons and to interpret how parents understood or overlooked those features. This analytic process allowed a systematic interpretation of how parents perceive cartoon language and the extent of their awareness.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Directorate of Research, Innovation and Consultancy of St Johns' University of Tanzania before fieldwork commenced. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participating parents/guardians. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used instead of real names, and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored. These measures ensured the study was conducted ethically and respectfully.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Assumption that All Cartoons Use "Good" Language

The findings from interviews revealedthat, most parents assumed that all cartoons are safe and use positive, child-

appropriate language, and thus did not check the dialogues, subtitles, or themes. One parent said:

> *"Cartoons are for children… they are made to teach them good things. I don't think they can include bad words or anything harmful. I just put them on so that my children can learn while I do other work,"*(Parent 07, August 2025*)*

On a different look, another parent said:

> *"These shows are made carefully… I think they are checked before they are shown, so they must be safe. I've never heard anything bad from them, so I have no reason to suspect,"* (Parent 11, August 2025).

However, documentary review of *Aikane* showed frequent use of sarcasm and romantic expressions such as *"You're so dramatic"* and *"Stop being clingy"*, while *In a Heartbeat* included romantic innuendos ("He makes my heart race," "I hope he likes me") that children could misinterpret as casual everyday expressions. CDA shows these carry hidden ideological meanings about relationships and emotions, yet none of the parents recognized this. This aligns with Adeyemi (2021) who found that Nigerian parents assumed safety without examining content, and Nikken & Schols (2022) who found similar misconceptions among European parents. SLT suggests that children exposed to such language may imitate it without understanding its intended nuance. Generally, parents' blind trust in the "child-appropriate" label leaves children unprotected from subtle linguistic messages that may not align with local cultural values.

4.2 Limited Direct Engagement or Co-viewing

The findings indicate that parents rarely sitting with their children to watch cartoons, mainly due to time constraints or disinterest. Children therefore interpret the content alone.

> *"Honestly, I have never sat with them to watch. I usually leave them on YouTube while I'm cooking or washing. As long as they are quiet and not disturbing me, I assume they are safe,"* (Parent 03, August 2025).

Similarly, one parent explained:

> *"Sometimes I see them laughing loudly, but I don't know what is funny. I am usually doing my business records or on my phone. I don't feel I need to watch with them,"* (Parent 01, August 2025).

The documentary analysis revealed that *In a Heartbeat* included fast-paced English dialogues such as *"You've got to be kidding me"* and *"This is totally insane"* phrases that carry sarcasm or exaggerated emotional tone. Parents who do not co-view cannot notice or explain such expressions.

This finding mirrors Steeves (2023) who reported low awareness among Canadian parents who did not co-view, and Mwaura (2021) who found unsupervised Kenyan children frequently used slang from cartoons. This means that without co-viewing, parents lose the chance to correct misinterpretations or teach children to critically question what they hear, allowing fictional characters to become their main language models.

4.3 Lack of Awareness of Hidden Slang and Sarcasm

The findings revealed that, few parents who sometimes watched cartoons admitted they could not follow or understand the slang and sarcasm due to language speed and foreign accents.

> *"They speak very fast and use big English words. I just see the children laughing and I laugh too, but I don't know what was said. I can't really catch the meaning,"* (Parent 12, August 2025).

Another parent added:

> *"Sometimes they say things like jokes that I don't understand… it is too fast and mixed with music. I don't think I would know if they said something bad,"* (Parent 08, August 2025).

The review of *Aikane* confirmed the use of informal teen slang like *"That's lame," "Come on dude," "So weird,"* and sarcastic tone markers like eye-rolling and exaggerated sighs. CDA shows such linguistic cues carry social positioning and peer culture ideologies, yet parents failed to detect them. This supports Chuma and Chasi (2019) who found South African parents unable to identify slang, and Nikken & Schols (2022) who showed similar comprehension gaps in Europe. This indicates the parents' limited English proficiency which prevents them from identifying subtle linguistic patterns, meaning children absorb them without guidance or cultural framing.

4.4 Belief that Cartoon are Automatically Educational

The findings revealed that, several parents believed all cartoons are designed to teach children, often citing English vocabulary, numbers, or morals, and therefore assumed they were safe. One parent explained:

> *"Cartoons are very helpful… my child learned colors, counting, and some English words from them. They teach good manners and how to share, so they are good,"* (Parent 05, August 2025).

In a quite different perspective, another parent explained that:

> *"They are better than local dramas because they have positive lessons. I think they are made to build children, so they can't include bad language,"* (Parent 10, August 2025).

While *Akili and Me* indeed contained deliberate teaching language such as *"Let's count together"* and *"Sharing is caring,"* the analysis of *In a Heartbeat* showed romantic-themed vocabulary ("crush," "falling for him") unrelated to education. University of Maryland (2017) showed *Akili and Me* improved vocabulary only when co-viewed, while Churcher et al. (2022) warned that entertainment cartoons introduced slang and antisocial expressions when watched unsupervised. SLT shows children imitate content regardless of educational intent. Therefore, by assuming all cartoons are educational, parents overlook entertainment content that embeds values and slang beyond their children's developmental stage.

4.5 Absence of Content Review or Monitoring Mechanisms

From the findings none of the parents reported using parental controls, checking subtitles, or reviewing the language of cartoons before allowing children to watch. One parent explained:

> *"I don't know how to check the language in cartoons… as long as they are busy and quiet, I let them watch. I have never thought of blocking anything,"* (Parent 09, August 2025).

Similarly, another parent explained:

> *"They watch on the phone or TV. I don't know how to review what they are seeing. I just trust that anything for children is safe enough,"* (Parent 14, August 2025).

Yet documentary review showed that none of the cartoons had Kiswahili subtitles, and *Aikane* and *In a Heartbeat* lacked any content rating labels, meaning parents had no language guides to rely on. Nyongesa and Oduor (2022) reported similar absence of parental controls in Uganda, while Steeves (2023) found that parents who used content filters had higher language awareness. CDA warns that uncontrolled exposure lets children absorb dominant cultural discourses, while SLT warns they will imitate language without critique. This shows not only low awareness, but also a digital skills gap in the sense that parents lack the know-how to monitor what their children are linguistically exposed to.

Generally, the findings show that parents greatly underestimate the complexity of cartoon language. While they assume safety and education, documentary analysis revealed slang, sarcasm, fast-paced English, and subtle ideological messages that children may imitate. This confirms SLT's idea that children copy admired models, and CDA's view that language carries cultural power and values. Similar gaps have been seen in Nigeria (Adeyemi, 2021), Ghana (Churcher et al., 2022), and Kenya (Mwaura, 2021). In contrast, parents in Bosnia and Heregovina (Trninić, D., Kurešanin Vukelić, A., & Mlinarević, J. 2023) and Sweden (Livingstone et al., 2017) engage in co-viewing and critical discussion, which protect children from inappropriate content. This highlights an urgent need to build Tanzanian parents' media literacy in line with the Education and Training Policy (2014), which emphasizes parental roles in early language development.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This paper concludes that parental awareness of the language used in children's cartoons in Dodoma City is generally low. Most parents assume cartoons are safe, educational, and free from harmful language, leading to minimal monitoring or engagement. This leaves children exposed to slang, sarcasm, and ideological messages that they may adopt uncritically. Without parental mediation, children are guided primarily by fictional models rather than real-life adult role models, confirming Social Learning Theory. Parents also lack the skills to decode hidden meanings in cartoon language, as highlighted by Critical Discourse Analysis. Strengthening parental awareness is essential to safeguard children's language development and cultural values.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to address the identified issues and enhance the effectiveness of the initiatives under investigation. These recommendations aim to guide policymakers, educators, parents, and other relevant stakeholders in implementing strategies that promote positive outcomes and mitigate the challenges revealed by the paper. By acting upon these suggestions, it is expected that more sustainable and high impact practices can be established, ultimately contributing to improved performance and well-being of the targeted groups:

1. Parents should promote parental co-viewing and post-viewing discussions to help children interpret cartoon language critically.

2. The government should conduct community-based media literacy workshops to equip parents/guardians with skills for evaluating cartoon language.

3. The Ministry of Education and Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) should develop national guidelines on children's audiovisual content and parental monitoring roles.

4. The Ministry of Education should support local production of educational cartoons in Kiswahili to reduce dependence on foreign content with unfamiliar expressions

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