

EXPLORING THE YOUTUBE KIDS APP LANGUAGE IMPACT ON GENDER ROLES IN PAKISTANI TODDLERS

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of YouTube Kids app language on the formation and understanding of gender roles in Pakistani toddlers. The research explores how the content and language used in YouTube Kids can influence children's perceptions of gender, considering the cultural context of Pakistani society. The study employs a qualitative research approach, interviews with parents, teachers, religious scholars, parenting experts, child specialists, psychologists, psychiatrists, hypnosis and NLP master trainers, communication specialists, and mainstream media experts. Purposive sampling was used to select 17 participants from Lahore, Pakistan. The data collected through semi-structured interviews was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The findings reveal that while children learn gender roles primarily from home and society, YouTube Kids can influence their understanding of gender. Parents play an important role in guiding children's media consumption and mitigating potential negative influences. The study also explores the impact of YouTube Kids on language acquisition. Participants agreed that children can easily learn new languages through these apps, significantly expanding their vocabulary. However, it is essential for parents to monitor children's social media use and provide guidance to ensure positive outcomes. This highlights the importance of parental supervision and guidance in navigating the complex landscape of YouTube Kids and its potential influence on children's gender roles and language development.

Keywords: YouTube Kids, toddlers, gender role, learning, children

Key Terms: YouTube (YT), YouTube Kids (YTK)

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a cornerstone of contemporary communication and entertainment in the rapidly evolving digital landscape. It revolutionizes human interaction and facilitates more immediate, efficient, and intimate connections (Gupta et al., 2022). YouTube is a well-known website where users may post, share, and watch videos on a variety of subjects. It includes educational content, such as language learning resources from English specialists and native speakers (Mahmudah, 2022). Numerous studies have highlighted the positive impact of YouTube on skill development, engagement, and learning outcomes (Shoufan & Mohamed, 2022). However, it's important to note that YouTube's open nature and lack of age or content restrictions can pose challenges, particularly for young users (Sah et al., 2020).

Similarly, YouTube Kids provides a curated platform for children under 13, offering a safer online space compared to the general YouTube website (Alghowinem, 2019). By filtering out inappropriate content, YTK aims to protect young viewers while exposing them to educational and entertaining videos. This platform can be a great tool for teaching toddlers basic concepts like alphabets and numbers (Mardhiah et al., 2022).

YTK has been recognized by numerous researchers as a valuable educational tool. Studies have shown that YTK channels can positively influence children's socialization skills,

leading to improvements in communication and English-language abilities (Auliya & Fadlilah, 2018; Perween & Hasan, 2020). A study conducted at Ihya Al-Ulum Kindergarten demonstrated that the use of YouTube Kids can significantly enhance language acquisition among young learners (Imran & Nasaruddin, 2022).

YouTube Kids App & Its Impact on Children

Children's video choices on YouTube Kids often reflect their real-world interests and experiences (O'Connor et al., 2023). YTK can be a valuable resource for parents seeking to enhance their children's communication skills (Imaniah et al., 2020). To ensure appropriate content consumption and screen time management, parental guidance is essential (Sarwar et al., 2023).

YTK offers a dynamic and engaging platform for young English learners. By exposing children to a diverse range of English-speaking cultures, dialects, and accents, YTK can help them expand their worldview and improve their linguistic abilities. This exposure to real-world language use in various contexts can foster cultural awareness and appreciation (GENELZA, 2024).

Gender Roles & Their Formation

Gender is a social and cultural construct that shapes roles, rights, behaviors, and traits associated with being male or female (Luppi, 2019; Anah & Okere, 2019). These gender norms have a significant impact on human development and health worldwide (Stark et al., 2020). Children begin internalizing gender norms at a young age, and these norms are reinforced throughout their lives through family, school, and media influences. Boys are often more aware of masculinity norms than girls, while girls are more likely to associate feminine characteristics with women. These internalizations can take place from an early age (Solbes-Canales et al., 2020).

Television plays a significant role in shaping children's understanding of gender. By portraying a variety of gender roles, including violent depictions of women, working women, powerful women, women alone at home, and women in competitive settings, television can influence children's perceptions. Regular television viewing has been linked to the expression of greater gender stereotypes, such as valuing women's beauty and supporting traditional gender roles (Ward & Grower, 2020). Children's exposure to media, particularly cartoon series, can reinforce traditional gender norms by encouraging stereotypical expectations and gender bias (Magotra & Kaur, 2018).

Gender Concept in Toddlers

Children's understanding of visual literature is deeply influenced by their ability to construct specific concepts based on detailed visuals within the story (Trihastutie, 2023). As noted by Lauren Lyles (2023), YTK videos often reflect gendered emotionality. The media has a critical role to play in dispelling gender stereotypes and encouraging better emotional expression in youngsters by supporting equitable depictions of emotions in all genders. Research suggests that gender differences in emotional expression among children are relatively small (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013).

Children's exposure to gender messages during their formative years can significantly influence their perceptions of gender roles and societal expectations. Commercials are particularly concerning, as they often reinforce gender stereotypes by rewarding characters for exhibiting traditional gender behaviors (Bloom, 2021).

The Impact of Media on Children's Perceptions

Screen media use in children can have both positive and negative effects on social development. While reducing screen time and optimizing media content can help improve social skills and reduce behavioral problems (Ren, 2023), excessive screen time has been

associated with overweight/obesity, diminished sleep, and various health issues in toddlers and preschoolers (Li et al., 2020). Minimizing screen time and encouraging interactive non-screen-based activities like reading and storytelling can promote healthy development and intellectual benefits in children aged 0-4 years (Poitras et al., 2017).

Young children thrive on exploration and interaction with their environment. While technology can be a fun and educational tool, limiting screen time is crucial for their development. McNeill et al (2019) suggest in their study that reducing screen exposure to around 30 minutes per day can have positive effects on preschool children's psychosocial and cognitive development. Excessive screen time has been linked to increased inattention problems and a 7-fold higher risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Tamana et al., 2019).

Toddlers' Language Learning Ability

According to Black (2020), toddlers are the younger kids, age range from infancy to preschool. They are typically aged 1 to 3, although some sources may extend this range to 4 years old. Their language development is influenced by various factors, including vocabulary and morph-syntactic abilities (Dicataldo & Roch, 2022). Attention capacities and maternal sensitivity during pregnancy are the factors that play a crucial role in toddlers' engagement with literacy activities (Snijders et al., 2020).

Toddlers' natural curiosity and eagerness to explore their surroundings drive their learning. They learn through their senses and by interacting with both people and objects. Three effective strategies for supporting children's learning include modeling desired behaviors, providing clear instructions, and offering step-by-step guidance. As noted by the Raising Children Network (2024), these approaches can create a nurturing environment that fosters learning, growth, and the development of positive behaviors.

The Role of Language in Shaping Gender Perceptions

Encouraging children to acquire new skills can play a crucial role in shaping their positive development. Toddlers benefit from language-learning environments that foster frequent interactions, extended conversations, and opportunities for semantic development. According to Hansen and Broekhuizen (2021), responsive caregivers who encourage dialogue can significantly impact a child's language acquisition. However, factors such as the presence of older siblings, age gaps, gender dynamics, maternal stress, household size, and social interactions can negatively influence language development (Havron et al., 2022).

Lauren Taylor Lyles (2023) found that YouTube Kids videos often portray gendered emotions. However, she also noted that equitable depictions of people and their feelings in media can help break down gender stereotypes related to emotions. Rachel Chapman (2022) emphasized the importance of creating gender-inclusive environments in early childhood education and challenging traditional notions of gender neutrality.

Media Dependency Theory

Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976) posits that individuals' reliance on media to fulfill their needs directly influences the media's impact on their beliefs and behaviors. The active audience plays a crucial role in selecting media based on their needs and external factors such as societal norms, economic conditions, and cultural influences. This theory extends the uses and gratification approach by emphasizing the audience's active role in the communication process. Key concepts are media gratification, dependency patterns, media displacement, and mediation and dependency. This study used this theory to understand the specific benefits toddlers derive from YouTube Kids, such as entertainment, education, or social connection, examine how toddlers' reliance on YTK evolves over time, and also Assess whether YouTube Kids displaces other activities or social interaction in toddlers' lives.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to investigate the influence of YouTube Kids app language content on gender roles among Pakistani toddlers, aged 2 to 3 years. Grounded in Media Dependency Theory, the research utilizes in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, religious scholars, parenting expert, child specialist, psychologist, psychiatrist, hypnosis and NLP master trainer, communication experts and mainstream media expert to gain a nuanced understanding of how YTK app language impact on gender. Qualitative research is ideal for understanding complex social phenomena and subjective experiences (Knott et al., 2022). Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their relevance to the research question, ensuring a rich and insightful dataset. A sample size of 17 participants was determined to achieve data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data.

Results

Toddlers primarily learn about gender roles from their homes and society, rather than from social media platforms. YouTube and similar apps can influence children's understanding of gender identity, but they are not the primary source of information. On the other hand, Children often imitate characters from cartoons and videos, which can reinforce gender stereotypes. Parents play a crucial role in shaping children's perceptions of gender, both through their actions and by monitoring the content their children consume.

The primary concern is the potential for young children to internalize gender roles from online videos. Parents, teachers, and experts agree that these can influence children. As one teacher said children started to imitate the behavior of the characters shown in the YTK videos. Experts disagree on whether social media content can create limiting factors in children's behavior. Some believe it can reinforce traditional gender roles, while others argue it can challenge these norms.

Participants offered diverse perspectives on whether children can easily learn social media languages and the potential effects. Most agree that children can easily learn new languages through social media, highlighting positive aspects like improved vocabulary, exposure to different cultures, and learning new skills. Some express concerns about exposure to inappropriate content, neglect of native languages, and cultural influence. The importance of parental supervision and guidance is emphasized.

Theme 1: Gender Roles and YouTube Kids

This theme explores how YouTube Kids' content might influence children's understanding and development of gender roles. It investigates whether the videos and characters children encounter on the platform reinforce traditional gender stereotypes or promote more inclusive and equitable views of gender.

Impact of Social Media

Children learn gender roles primarily from home and society, not social media. The participants of this research do not consider social media as a primary tool to teach gender roles. They believe that this concept is developed in children very first at home, when their parents or relatives call them, they assign such words in their communication which starts flourishing in the child's brain and it gives them the concept of their reality.

Similarly, social media can reinforce gender stereotypes. In the view of communication specialists, boys, and girls watched, observed, or rather absorbed the dress style, the hairstyle, the attitudes, and the behaviors in videos. Even they felt the tone of communication and started adopting them in their routine life.

Parents should monitor children's media consumption as they imitate what they see. All participants strongly stressed the content consumed by the young ones. They, at this age,

should be treated with great care, and their mental health is also of great importance. What they observe can affect their thinking pattern that's why parental supervision is the linchpin to giving them a rightful direction.

Parental Influence

Parents' role is important in shaping children's gender identity. In their communication, parents often use such words which creates the concept of gender in toddlers. Especially in Urdu, the word to call a boy or a girl is different like that 'ka' or 'ki', with a passage of time this concept is established in their minds with its meanings related to gender segregation.

Parents should aware of the content that their children are watching. They should actively monitor children's media consumption and guide them properly. It is necessary to assess whether the content is age-appropriate and free from harmful messages. If children are exposed to violent or inappropriate content, parents should intervene and provide guidance to help them understand and cope with such material.

Cultural Impact

Cultural norms and values influence children's perceptions of gender. According to the participants, In the pursuit of creating a globalized world, localization is being lost. Local culture and values are being affected and are at risk. Being caught up in globalization makes us forget our local culture. This is causing issues like identity loss, which in turn leads to many mental and psychological problems.

Traditional gender roles can be reinforced by the media. Frequent television viewing is associated with expressing more stereotypic beliefs about gender, including attitudes about appearance, stereotyping, and support for traditional sexual roles (Ward & Grower, 2020). This applies to mobile phone users as well, as they are also exposed to various forms of media content. These preconceptions may even have an impact on toddlers, highlighting the significance of taking cultural context into account when talking about gender identity.

Imitation and Learning

Children often imitate characters from cartoons and videos. Sometimes they even relate their voices to the character's voice they like. They often try to speak in the same way as their favorite character speaks in the video, and they even adopt the same attitude as that character. This can lead to the adoption of gender stereotypes. Parents should be mindful of the messages children are receiving.

Theme 2: The Impact of YouTube Kids on Children

This theme examines the broader effects of YouTube Kids on children, beyond just gender roles. It explores how the platform might influence children's cognitive development, social skills, and emotional well-being.

Parental Role

Parents are important in guiding children and preventing them from falling victim to stereotypes. They need to provide guidance, explain the difference between reality and fantasy, and foster positive values in their children. Instead of irritating, parents should answer the questions raised by children and explain to them whether what they are watching is good or bad. Children should not be left to watch videos without guidance; their young minds should not be confused. Parents can act as positive role models and provide guidance that counters harmful stereotypes.

Impact on Children

Children may develop limited beliefs about gender roles and be influenced by the behaviors of characters in videos. This can affect their choices of toys, activities, and behaviors. Parenting experts claim that plenty of material supports these stereotypes and

upholds the conventional ideas of what is suitable for males and girls. Children may internalize these stereotypes and limit their self-expression and creativity.

Societal Influence

Today's children have learned a lot from social media at a young age. Societal norms and expectations can reinforce gender stereotypes. These stereotypes can be perpetuated through media and the environment. Participants emphasize the broader societal context in which gender stereotypes are embedded. Media and cultural influences can contribute to the reinforcement of these stereotypes.

Counteracting Stereotypes

Parents need to provide guidance, explain the difference between reality and fantasy, and foster positive values in their children. They should also limit screen time and encourage a balanced approach to media consumption. Children should also be told that whatever is being shown on TV or is reaching them through social media on their mobile phones is limited to that medium and has no connection to real life. And this task can only be done by parents. They can take the initiative in imparting knowledge to their kids and encouraging moral principles. Additionally, limiting screen time and providing alternative activities can help children develop a broader perspective.

Theme 3: Social Media and Children's Behavior

This theme delves into the broader impact of social media on children's behavior, including potential positive and negative consequences. It examines how social media might influence children's self-esteem, social interactions, and mental health.

Impact on Children's Behavior

Social media content can reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes, potentially limiting children's behavior and their exploration of interests. The content does have the power of limiting them or freeing them, it has the power to control their behavior. So parents must be very vigilant about the content of social media, they must define the content that can give them the idea that they can do all possible best things in the world. They should not be letting their kids watch such content that tells them, oh! you can't do this. Parents need to be aware of these risks and guide their children accordingly.

Parental Role

Parents play a crucial role in guiding children's understanding of social media and mitigating potential negative influences. They can aid kids in developing their critical thinking abilities and avoid falling prey to harmful stereotypes. Participants in this research agreed that parental involvement is essential for protecting children from the negative effects of social media. Parents can provide guidance, support, and supervision to ensure that their kids are utilizing social media responsibly and safely.

Cultural Factors

Cultural and societal norms can significantly influence the impact of social media on children's behavior. It's crucial to consider the specific cultural context in which children are consuming content. Cultural factors can shape children's perceptions of gender roles, their expectations for behavior, and their interpretation of media messages. For example, an NLP trainer noted that in Western cultures often portrayed in media, boys are depicted as doing housework. This aligns with certain religious and cultural values, and in some cases, even goes beyond traditional gender roles.

Content Checking

Social media content can have both positive and negative effects. Parents should be aware of the potential risks and benefits of different types of content and actively guide their children accordingly. While YouTube Kids (YTK) is generally considered safe, parents

should evaluate its content in relation to their own cultural and societal values. Some content may contribute to a sense of division between boys and girls. These conceptions are greatly influenced by their surroundings as well. Parents should actively monitor the content their children are consuming and engage in open discussions about potential implications. This can help children develop a critical understanding of the messages they encounter online.

Theme 4: Language Acquisition and Social Media

This theme focuses on the potential benefits and challenges of using social media for language learning. It explores how social media platforms can expose children to a variety of languages and cultures, and how they might facilitate language acquisition.

Ease of learning

Children can easily acquire new languages through social media. With music, colors, and animations, children get inspired and learn very quickly, something that used to take an entire year. Most participants agree that children can learn social media languages easily due to their natural language acquisition abilities. They believe that learning a language is very good for children, many children have a good English speaking power due to YTK. They also believe that the native language of young ones should also be focused. As communication specialists said learning English is not a bad thing, but the condition is that one should not forget one's language.

Valuable Tool

Participants agreed that these apps are exceptional tools for language learning, significantly expanding children's vocabulary. YTK is also considered a useful tool in improving language skills, vocabulary, and cultural exposure. Parenting experts said that While learning a language is beneficial, it's important to prioritize instilling your values in your child. Teach them your values first, and then focus on language skills. On the other hand, child specialist said that believe schools can provide a better learning environment compared to these apps.

Concerns

Children may exposure to inappropriate content, neglect of native languages, and cultural influence. Communication specialists believed that a child should first learn their native language, so as the parents, teachers and other participants.

Parental Guidance

Parental supervision and guidance are essential to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of social media language learning on gender roles. By actively monitoring their children's online activities and providing appropriate guidance, parents can help ensure that their children develop a healthy understanding of gender and avoid the negative consequences associated with unmonitored social media use.

Discussion

YTK offers both benefits and drawbacks. Parents should actively engage with their children by watching videos together rather than passively allowing screen time. McLuhan's concept of media as "extensions of man" highlights how technology can amplify human capabilities (Compton, 2015). Today, mobile phone usage is not limited to adults or adolescents; even preschoolers are frequently exposed to these devices. Parents often intentionally give mobile phones to their children to keep them occupied, especially when they need to focus on other tasks or responsibilities.

Parents expressed varying opinions on the impact of social media on children's gender identity. Some believed it reinforced stereotypes, while others saw it as a neutral influence. Experts, including teachers, religious scholars, and psychologists, generally agreed that social media can shape children's understanding of gender, but it's not the sole factor. They

emphasized the importance of parental guidance and real-world experiences. Some respondents highlighted the influence of cultural norms and values on children's perceptions of gender. Cultural and socioeconomic considerations can influence how social media affects children's behavior in different ways.

Gracella and Nur (2020) studied students' perspectives on learning English using the YouTube app. They interviewed 17 participants, aged over 2-3 years, to gather data. The study findings indicate that the YouTube application provides valuable feedback to students regarding their experiences learning English, which can contribute to their language proficiency both in the classroom and at home. Kilag et al. (2023) investigated YouTube's role in English language learning among preschool children, interviewing 10 parents. Their findings suggested that parents and educators may consider YouTube children's instructional videos a valuable resource for fostering early English language acquisition.

Temban et al. (2021) explored informal learning through the YouTube Kids app during COVID-19 among 11-12-year-olds using mixed methods, including online questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. They found that YTK provided entertainment for children while facilitating both formal and informal learning. Sufa & Dzulfikri (2023) observed that a Javanese toddler's foreign language development improved through watching English videos on YouTube, ranging from animal songs to nursery rhymes and cartoon dialogues.

The experts emphasize the importance of parental guidance in helping children navigate social media content and avoid negative influences. Parents are seen as crucial in guiding children and preventing them from falling victim to stereotypes. Parents need to provide guidance, explain the difference between reality and fantasy, and foster positive values in their children. Children may develop limited beliefs about gender roles and be influenced by the behaviors of characters in videos. Parents can help children navigate the online world safely and effectively, ensuring that their language learning experiences are positive and enriching.

There is a consensus that children can learn social media languages easily. However, opinions diverge on the potential consequences. Some view social media as a valuable tool for language learning, while others raise concerns about its impact on cultural identity and social values. Positive impacts of YTK are improved language skills and vocabulary, exposure to different cultures and perspectives, and learning new skills and knowledge. Negative impacts are exposure to inappropriate content and negative influences, neglect of native languages and cultural identity, and Potential for social and emotional issues.

Conclusion

YouTube Kids is a platform designed for children, offering curated videos, parental controls, and educational features. YTK can be a valuable tool for language learning. Yet it is important to approach it with caution and provide children with appropriate guidance and supervision.

The responses provided offer a range of perspectives on the impact of social media on children's gender identity development. While social media can influence children's understanding of gender roles, it is not the primary factor. The role of parents in shaping children's perceptions, and cultural norms and values also contribute significantly. By actively monitoring children's online activities and guiding them towards positive content, they can help ensure that social media has a positive influence on their development.

Experts agree that parental involvement is essential in mitigating the potential negative effects of social media on children's behavior. The analysis reveals that young children are susceptible to gender stereotypes perpetuated through online videos. In order to

effectively manage screen time, parents must provide direction to counter these influences and promote positive values and self-expression. Further research is needed to explore the long-term implications of YouTube Kids on children's overall development in diverse cultural contexts.

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