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***The Essentialist Child-Orientedness of
American and Japanese Animation in Algerian
Academia: A Critical Review***

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ABSTRACT

Rather than remaining confined to the realm of children's entertainment, animation has been reconstructed as a medium capable of addressing multiple audience groups through tailored content. However, by strictly addressing transnational animation as localized children's content in the Arab world, Algerian academia is fixated on viewing animation as essentially child-oriented. This paper critically reviews some Algerian research on animation (particularly, anime and American cartoons) to evaluate its consistency with the reconceptualization of animation's content and audience. Focused on a media effects paradigm, the reviewed papers fail to engage with two fundamental frameworks: 1) animation audience segmentation beyond children, and 2) the transformation of media landscapes in these animations' countries of origin, which allowed for a reconstruction of what animation and its audience can be. This failure undermines the practical usefulness of the results for advancing research on animation and child entertainment as well as for organizing relevant industrial practices in Algeria and the Arab world. Therefore, a consideration of a constructivist framework for understanding animation is encouraged in future research.

Keywords: cartoon, anime, animation, child-orientedness, audience segmentation, children's media, essentialism.

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INTRODUCTION

Since it emerged as mainstream entertainment in the West during the twentieth century, animation has been approached as a form of film production, albeit an inferior one for its lack of the realism that characterizes the filmic image (Steinberg, 2014, p. 287; Brown, 2006, p. 1; Lamarre, 2002, p. 333). This has translated into theoretical and formal constraints imposed on the nascent commercial form, which were exploited by the industry to fill gaps in audience segmentation. However, unlike most live-action films, animation grew as a medium that catered to the young and adult, for its content could justifiably be edited to suit any target audience. Such circumstances gradually engendered a trivialization of animation, leading to its restriction to children's entertainment for decades. Industrial imperatives gave rise to regulative and industrial practices (Mittell, 2004, pp. 67-68; deCordova, 1994, p. 203) that further restricted it to the confines of this perspective. Eventually, however, they were also responsible for releasing animation from these confines once new media technologies provided alternative venues through which animation for older audiences could be produced to circulate safely (Denison, 2015, pp. 59-63; Mittell, 2004, pp. 80-81). This change in the reconceptualization of animation was enabled by a concomitant construction of animation's content as increasingly non-child-friendly.

In another part of the world, Algeria and the Arab world, animation is still largely framed as child-oriented¹. With a profound lack of domestic animation and children's entertainment production, the dependence on cheap licenses of transnational animation, particularly American and Japanese, remains the most viable solution for the child entertainment industry (Steemers & Sakr, 2017, p. 1). Nevertheless, the changes in the media environment enabling new approaches to animation's content and distribution, and the increased accessibility enabled by legal and illegal circulation of different animated texts on the internet, require a revision of the persistent perspective of animation as children's entertainment in Algeria and the Arab world. Such a revision should initially be executed at the academic level, but it should take into account some major points of misunderstanding of the animated medium's current position.

On this basis, our paper critically reviews the recurrence of the perspective of animation's child-orientedness in some Algerian academic research. Considering the unsound and outdated foundations of this perspective at present, our objective is to assess the extent to which it hinders the production of adequate outlooks and interpretations, leading to the reproduction of inapt frameworks and diagnostics of

¹ Our reference to the Arab world is mostly based on the fact that Japanese and American animations are regionally distributed to all countries in the region, including Algeria, since there is no active domestic industry of licensing and localizing child entertainment in Algeria. However, we should note that the lack of awareness of the issue of the reconceptualization of animation's audience is more prominent in Algerian academia.

relevant contemporary issues. As similar research is expected to yield results with practical value for the industry, we believe that any misconceptions arising from this research can misorient the industry's targeting of juvenile audiences, potentially leading to undesirable outcomes. Accordingly, this paper aspires to lay the foundation for future research by locating major areas of misapprehension for it to overcome.

As Algerian research on animation often overlooks it, the first section of this article delineates the historical origins of animation's child-orientedness and how it eventually subsided in favor of a more audience-inclusive one. It focuses on the emergence and subsequent development of two animated forms that dominated transnational animation imports in the Arab world, American cartoons and Japanese anime. While American animation played a major role in establishing the child-friendly approach to animation production, Japanese animation, or anime, has contributed to elevating animation to a medium encompassing any artistic genre (Brown, 2006, p. 2). We will focus particularly on addressing the changes in anime's content as perceived in America, as it helps in emphasizing the contrast at the industry level between the two models within one geographical setting. The section will also overview of the contextual factors in the Arab world, which contributed to the persistence of the essentialist view of animation. The second section will present and discuss the relevant data on the preoccupation with this perspective in Algerian academia and the implications this has for inhibiting adequate development of future research. Finally, the paper will conclude with a summary of the major issues that arise from the inadequate framing of animation in academia, along with highlighting leverageable areas to generate better insights for future research on the medium of animation in Algeria and the Arab world.

2. Constructing Animation's Audience

2.1 The Birth of Child-Oriented Animation

To animate has a dual meaning: to imbue with movement and with life, making animation both the art of movement and the art of creating an "illusion of life" (Cholodenko, 1991, pp. 15-20). A discussion of this definition is the topic of much theoretical and philosophical work on animation since the 1980s, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, similar definitions have been mobilized in writings about animation to ground it as an artistic medium worthy of serious consideration after decades of trivializing (Crawford, *Saturday Morning Fever*, 1991, p. 113). This trivialization was inherent in subjection to film, viewing animation merely as a non-serious mode of filmic production, and eventually associating it with children (Brown, 2006, p. 1; Lamarre, 2002, p. 333). Contrary to the widespread belief that animation was inherently childish, produced for a juvenile audience, however, this attribution was essentially the result of an active construction of the medium and its content at the level

of the industry, which itself was occasionally shaped by a critical discourse. Most of this early discourse about animation was preoccupied with the effects of animation on children (Wells, 2002, p. 86; Crawford, 1991, pp. 113-114).

Paul Wells observed that the popularity of the late nineteenth-century praxinoscope among children somehow foretold this association between children and animation (Wells, 1998, p. 2). Thriving in the early twentieth-century as part of the film industry, Wells notes that “animation has become synonymous with Disney, and thus other kinds of animation and other important film-makers in the field have been further neglected” (Wells, 1998, pp. 2-3) (see also Wells (2002, p. 153), Price (2001, pp. 154, 161), and Cohen (1997, p. 195)). This may suggest that non-child-friendly animation fell out of favor simply due to a Disney effect. Indeed, the temptation may transpire for one to overstate such a claim, especially when some transnational animation directors and artists themselves acknowledged the influence of Disney animation’s thematic and artistic features on their work (Schodt, 2007, pp. 43-44; Wells, 2002, p. 45). Yet Wells himself accounts for Walt Disney’s confession that Disney’s success was due to the strategic navigation of industry imperatives of his time (Wells, 2002, p. 39).

Accounting for the Disney effect overstates the role of textual features and commercial success alone in shaping the form that animation took, which may essentialize the child-oriented nature of animation. This interpretation can obscure the role played by contextual elements, including non-economic and non-textual industrial and non-industrial practices (Kompare, 2005, pp. xii-xiii; Mittell, 2004, p. xii), and the transforming media environment (Denison, 2015, pp. 59-63; Hills, 2007, p. 50) in reconstituting what particular forms and genres are and who their audiences are. While Disney’s contribution to the perception of child-orientedness of animation is indisputable, it cannot be overstated amidst a lack of attention to the circumstances that birthed the success of this particular model, and further cemented the perception in America, and by extension, the world.

Beginning with the massive success of its first animated feature *Snow White* (1937), and concurrently with the formative years of mainstream animation, Disney’s success also coincided with the controversies surrounding children’s access to live-action cinema theaters (Smith, 2005, p. 48). Raised by progressive pressure groups and parents, these controversies surrounded questions regarding the extent to which live-action films targeted a younger audience as “‘true’ and ‘proper’” children (deCordova, 1994, p. 203). Regarded then as an inferior form of film production (Cholodenko, 1991, pp. 9-10), Disney’s child-friendly animation allowed worried adults to envision the animated features and shorts as a safer alternative to live-action cinema, not least for their ease of editing. Between 1934 and 1968, American censorship and regulation codes, followed by the age-rating systems, further contributed to constructing

animation's audience as primarily children (Cohen, 1997, pp. 5-6).

If Disney sowed the early seeds of animation's child-orientedness, this status had only become increasingly recognizable after the spread of television. On television, earlier cinema theater animated works were initially used as "low-budget fillers", popular among viewers of all ages (Kompere, 2005, p. 118; Mittell, 2004, p. 66) before the new televisual practice of scheduling restricted them to children's segments. According to Jason Mittell, scheduling practices can shape the content and status of particular genres and forms in the long run through categorizing specific programs into audience-specific broadcasting blocks (Mittell, 2004, p. 58). Animation was subject to such practice. Although many of the earliest television animations were mostly considered for an adult audience (Beck, 1994, p. 20), scheduling practices eventually fixated the conception of animation as a children's medium.

At least since the late 1950s, animation shorts were usually repeated between major blocks, or during specific children's blocks scheduled after school or on Saturday mornings, since it was believed "that children did not mind the repetition of shorts" (Mittell, 2004, p. 68). Viewing animation as "'harmless' entertainment" (p. 77) continued until regulations were changed in response to more tailored scheduling practices and media technologies introduced during the 1980s and 1990s. To be viewed as 'harmless', however, did not mean television animation was completely unobjectionable, as controversies continued to arise even concerning some seemingly family-friendly animations, like *Tom & Jerry* (Crawford, 1991, p. 116). Notwithstanding violent and sexually suggestive hints conveyed through slapstick, even depictions of the death of characters were considered harmful to the average American child (Price, 2001, p. 157). However, the changes in the media landscape eventually enabled the production and circulation of this and more adult animation with relative ease, and the discourse on animation began to recognize it as an artistic and commercial medium capable of targeting older audiences without posing a risk to children.

2.2 Expanding Animation's Audience between Anime and Cartoons

During the late 1980s, Disney experimented with content targeted at a mixed audience of adults and children, culminating in the success of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989) (Mittell, 2004, p. 80). In addition, Japanese anime also became increasingly included in mainstream venues in the United States. During these years, the boundaries defining animation's position as a form of children's entertainment began to fade. Nevertheless, as indicated above, the success of a few films and series (Napier, 2007, p. 170) cannot singlehandedly be responsible for this huge change, especially given animation's longstanding association with a vulnerable audience group.

This success can be partly attributed to the underlying changes in industrial and regulatory practices following the transformation of the media environment, which enabled new ways of producing and exhibiting media content. For example, this change cannot be viewed in isolation from the transition of the “pushed” content of television broadcast to the “pulled” content stored on VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray, or distributed through online file sharing and streaming (Seel, 2018, p. 67). These have been generally related to television to distinguish how every new set of technological advancement has transformed its experience (Jenner, 2014, pp. 2-3). Particularly for non-child-friendly animation, some of this content has already been circulating underground for years before receiving official releases due to these new media trajectories, thus offering safer channels to distribute and access this content with little to no exposure of children to it (Denison, 2015, pp. 102-110; Napier, 2007, pp. 170-171; Patten, 2004, pp. 119-122). Nevertheless, the increased accessibility to different content through pull media was certainly a cause for concern.

However, even with the developments in the media landscape, to account for technological advancement as the only factor causing the transformation in animation’s content and audience would be to fall into technological determinism. Even with these developments taking place, some other conditions delayed the mainstreaming of adult animation for years. In this instance, economic determinations played a major role. As American and Japanese animations developed as commercial forms, it was difficult for major companies to risk deviating from the only lucrative model that the industry had acknowledged for decades: animation as children’s entertainment.

Hence, Fox’s attempt with *The Simpsons* (1989—present) on a primetime segment rather than on a children’s was one of the most important of such early attempts, given the company’s then less prominent position in the American entertainment industry (Mittell, 2004, p. 80). *The Simpsons* derives its appeal to adults from its occasional adult satirical content, although even this content has initially subjected it to criticism, given animation’s continuous association with the generic category that is children’s cartoons at that time (Mittell, 2004, pp. 80-81). The tendency persisted that labeled every animated production in America a cartoon (Price, 2001, p. 154), laden with limitations that the conventions it has always been associated with imposed.

While American animation has mostly explored its appeal to older audiences through slapstick and adult satirical comments and jokes, Japanese animation’s take on the chance was more extreme. Despite its origins in political and educational animated films aimed at adults and children alike (Denison, 2015, pp. 73-74), Japanese television animation, or anime, had itself been predominantly child-oriented, at least until the 1970s. In her book *Anime: A Critical Introduction*, Rayna Denison relates the changes in anime genres and target audiences to the developments in exhibition and reception

technologies since the late 1970s, with each lending anime producers new exploitable affordances to expand their target audience (Denison, 2015, pp. 69-70). She, however, notes that the construction of the animated form as such had to be discursively affirmed.

Television played a significant role in the early formation of anime as a child-friendly form, with Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atomu* (known in the U.S. as *Astro Boy* (1963)) laying the foundation for the early model of television anime (Denison, 2015, p. 78). Nevertheless, what distinguished Japanese anime from its Western counterparts was its more complex plots, character backgrounds, and the darker themes it explored, even in children's anime. Fred Patten's remark on the distinction between American and Japanese animation at the level of episodes is particularly insightful in this regard. While American cartoons have typically relied on an episodic formula that enables the extensive editing and even rewriting of whole episodes when required, Japanese anime has preferred serial stories, told across multiple episodes, if not through the entire series (Patten, 2004, p. 56). The serial formula allowed more plot and character development, lending anime more complex content than most Western animation. This early interest in animation as a more potent form, capable of exploring areas previously restricted to cinema, enabled anime to develop distinctively when the conditions facilitated the exploration of mass and adult appeal in production and distribution practices. Another contributing factor to anime's sophistication is related to Japanese film industry professionals transferring their expertise to the animation industry following the former's recession (Napier, 2007, p. 135).

The significant shift in anime's content intensified with the advent and popularization of video technologies in the 1970s. These developments opened up new prospects for viewing, as they generally offered a more flexible experience and private space for access to different animations by adults. Given its pioneering narrative complexity and sophistication, fans sought anime on alternative platforms not only in search of the uncut editions of popular television series, but also of obscure and extreme anime content that American cartoons could not offer (Napier, Akira, 2001, pp. 249-251). In Japan, this new environment prompted serious experimentation with more complex, philosophical themes and extremely violent and sexually explicit content, resulting in a more varied market of anime as opposed to cartoons (Crawford, 2009, p. 78). While mostly legally distributed in Japan, anime of the VHS era initially disturbed the peace of the American animation market, where all animation was still conflated with children's cartoons.

Chosen to fill schedule gaps on American television due to its cost-effectiveness compared to new productions, early anime had undergone extensive editing that almost stripped it of its distinctiveness. Anime was forced into "the overly exhausted realm of fairy tales with manufactured happy endings and token animal sidekicks" (Price, 2001,

p. 153). Note that these practices occurred despite the general child-friendliness of many early anime titles. This practice continued until the late 1970s, when American youth discovered an unedited subtitled science fiction anime on a Japanese community channel for the first time (Patten, 2004, p. 43). The initial reaction to anime's discovery was a growing dissatisfaction among teenage and adult members of the emerging fandom with the editing and regulation practices of the industry. Before long, more anime was discovered, leading to the establishment around it of America's first anime fan club as part of the larger science fiction and comic books fandom.

What ensued from this was a collision between the American official economy of the animation industry, which confined anime to the status of the familiar children's cartoons, and an emerging shadow economy of the fandom, which sought to undo the industrial hierarchy that placed anime at an inferior position to live-action through its editing practices (Horbinski, 2019, pp. 15-16). Through practices that ranged from letter campaigns to broadcasters who cancelled certain anime series (Horbinski, 2019, pp. 17-18), to organizing specialized conventions (Napier, 2007, pp. 152-155), to planning fan gatherings and collective anime screenings (Eng, 2012, pp. 159-160), the fandom functioned mostly underground, leaving the discovered non-child-friendly Japanese animation away from mainstream entertainment which was not ready to risk investment in the unfamiliar.

The fandom continued to expand, and, eventually, these activities culminated in the emergence of fan-led small businesses, which were willing to license adult anime that big companies were not willing to risk licensing (Beck, 1996, para. 6, para. 11). Thence, Streamline Pictures released *Akira's* (1989) (Patten, 2004, p. 40), which is often credited with popularizing adult anime in the West (Denison, 2015, p. 32; Bolton, 2014, p. 295; Napier, *Impressionism*, 2007, p. 170). The massive success it had in American cinema theaters finally attracted enough critical attention that, although wary of potential children's exposure to inappropriate content, it ultimately recognized teenagers and adults as an apt audience for animation (Denison, 2015, pp. 22-29, 40-48). As expected, this recognition ultimately shaped anime's perception as a form that transcends children's content into more mature content in popular and academic discourses. It found its best and safest expression in age-restricted cinema theaters and video markets before the internet, but, ultimately, it was equally embraced by licensors and distributors who disseminated it across multiple trajectories that were previously only restricted to live-action production, including television (Saito, 2020, p. 156; Orbaugh, 2015, p. 85; Napier, *Impressionism*, 2007, p. 170; Patten, 2004, pp. 19-20).

2.3 Animation and Child-orientedness in the Arab World

Animation's target audience in America and Japan has been actively constructed through a combination of industrial and legal regulative practices that influenced and were influenced by attendant critical discourse. Conversely, for countries and regions that import rather than produce their animation domestically, the case can be different. The Arab world, including Algeria, is a case in point. Rather than an active, deliberate construction of its audience, animation's child-orientedness can be considered a result of the double effect of the passive importation of foreign animation and the negligence of the importance of domestic children entertainment production, a gap which these imported cheap animations have been intended to fill (Awan & Steemers, 2017, p. 20). Indeed, the efforts to establish domestic child entertainment production in the region remain scarce, leading to a prolonged and extensive dependence on foreign animation (Steemers & Sakr, 2017, p. 1). The region's postcolonial burden and persistent unrest have dictated a focus on other indispensable needs of children, making entertainment a lesser priority.

This does not indicate a total absence of children's entertainment and animation production in the region. Yet most of these productions have been centered in Egypt and Syria, and the rate at which they occurred has significantly diminished since the beginning of the political unrest in the region in the 2010s (Steemers & Sakr, 2017, p. 4). Along with the scarcity of local productions, questions have continuously been raised concerning the quality of these productions *vis à vis* their costs (Tayie, 2008, pp. para. 23-24). The answer to these questions is often the cost-effectiveness of importing cheap foreign animation, whose licensing and editing are significantly less expensive than new productions (Steemers & Sakr, 2017, p. 7). Therefore, for their affordable licenses, Western and Japanese animation still constitute the majority of children's programs on Arab television (Steemers & Sakr, pp. 5-6).

In addition to some original production limitations on violent and sexual content in some of these foreign animations, additional guidelines dictated by Arab national and regional authorities seeking to protect children from potentially corrupting moral and cultural values are often imposed (Steemers & Sakr, 2017, p. 5; Sayfo, 2017, pp. 76-77). Due to technical considerations, animation is especially easier to subject to these guidelines and edit than reality shows and live-action programs. This further establishes animation as a preferable alternative for other children's programs within such circumstances. Yet these regulative guidelines fall short of operating as intended when the original audience of these foreign animations and the ideal channels of circulation are not considered.

In Algeria, children's televised entertainment has been limited to short daily blocks on national public and private television. This left exposure to animation dependent primarily on specialized Arab television broadcasters, which themselves depend more on dubbing foreign animation series, shorts, and features than on original production. Even when recent attempts are made to launch national children's channels, dependence on these Arabic-dubbed foreign animated series remains the most affordable option. Given foreign animation's break with an essentialist conception of child-orientedness, its content may occasionally be objectionable in its cultures of origin, let alone in the Arab and Muslim world. However, the persistent lack of proper academic research to frame, critique, and direct the regional industrial practices of animation's distribution and exhibition is more problematic in Algeria, especially with the increasing attention given to children's entertainment in the region. We believe that focusing on this outdated conception can lead to misconceptions and even inclinations toward falsely grounded conspiracist accounts (e.g., Al-Kaabi's recent book on anime (2022, pp. 40-42)) that can further hinder adequate progress in academia and the industry alike. Thereby, attention should be called to the persistence of this misconception in Algerian academia as well.

On these grounds, we review some Algerian academic research that essentially frames animation as a medium for children. Particularly, we assess the extent to which this framing interferes with producing adequate research perspectives, leading to the generation of inapt frameworks and diagnostics of relevant issues. Furthermore, as similar research is oftentimes expected to generate results with practical value for the industry, we argue that correcting any existing misconceptions and addressing any research gaps is necessary.

3. Animation's Child-Orientedness in Algerian Research

Before proceeding with this section, note that the reviewed papers do not necessarily need to directly engage with the idea of the child-orientedness of animation or actively reproduce it. The mere framing of an aspect of the study by this perspective is a sufficient criterion for its inclusion in this review. Nevertheless, note that we have only reviewed papers published on the Algerian Scientific Journal Platform (ASJP); therefore, any studies that were published elsewhere were not covered in this review. Additionally, our paper does not provide an exhaustive review of all research on animation, nor does it posit the view of animation as child-oriented as the only present perspective in Algerian academia, although studies that consider it from a different viewpoint are scarce.

3.1 Media Effects and the Corruption of the Child

Writing about animation in the Arab and Algerian journalistic and academic fields is not exceptionally scarce, and critical interest in the topic in Algeria has recently increased. This is evident given the required attention to the encounters of a vulnerable audience group with an increasingly accessible media content that is still predominantly confined to the essentialist conception of child-orientedness. A necessary paradigm that provides the basis for much of the writing on animation in Algerian academia in this regard is that of media effects. This is not to say that all reviewed papers actively applied this approach; instead, their claims about animation, which are informed by its necessary child-orientedness, are framed by a media effects perspective.

Media effects studies undertake the task of examining the real or potential effects that the “exposure” to media content, the “use” of media technologies, or the intersection between the two, produce (Taylor & Ghaznavi, 2017, pp. 963-964). Children’s exposure to media content and its effects on the child’s development are among the most crucial areas of this field. It tends to be dominated by a wary discourse on the corruption of the child, incited by fear of exposure to objectionable media content. The discourse on the “corruption of the minor” has dominated writings on media effects for decades, especially when informed by an inherent notion of animation’s child-orientedness (Crawford, 1991, p. 113). This discourse is especially predominant in most of the papers that we reviewed, although it is not necessarily directly engaged with in all instances.

In her study on animation’s effects on the child’s behavioral development, Samiha Aliouat openly embraces a definition of animation as “child-oriented programs” (2018, p. 29). While not openly acknowledged in every work, the adherence to a child corruption discourse in other studies echoes this view of animation throughout the reviewed papers. While dependence on foreign animations in the region continues, it would be expected that critical discourse would take the development in foreign industries into consideration to forewarn the region’s entertainment industry of the repercussions of targeting younger audiences with inappropriate content. Nevertheless, an essentialist view still dominates even the views of clearly adult animation. Rather than defining animation historically and contextually to keep abreast with academic and industrial developments of the medium, the reviewed articles strictly abide by a definition of animation’s child-orientedness as an intrinsic textual feature (Mittell, 2001, p. 5), true to every animated series or film.

Accounts of the corrupting effects of animation usually fall along two tracks. On the one hand, some animation is criticized for its depiction of violent, sexually suggestive, excessively action-oriented, and fantastical content. When not properly contextualized during the editing and dubbing processes, such depictions are believed

to incite negative behavior in the child, which is a concern for parents, caregivers, educators, and researchers alike (قصري & اسعيداني, 2022, p. 131; 2018, pp. 401-402; عليوات, 2018, pp. 30-32). Saidani and Feguiri exemplify this with the depiction of violence as the sole option to solve problems in the American cartoon series *Superman* (2022, p. 131). Similarly, Ben Mohamed and Kasri (2018, p. 412) and Ben Mohamed (2022, p. 499) caution against the negative influence of violent depictions in martial arts (mostly Japanese) animated series, suggesting a direct causal relationship between watching these animated series and the potential for developing violent tendencies in children. Additionally, Belgueliel (2022, p. 73) and Sahi and Keziz (2019, pp. 103-107) also establish a similar causal relationship between exposure to animation and the development of adverse and violent behavior.

While most are theoretical studies that draw on previous empirical research regarding children's exposure to violence on a child's behavioral and attitudinal development, Sahi and Keziz's empirical study is perhaps the most assertive in this regard. In their paper, Sahi and Keziz question parents regarding their children's attitudes toward violent animation and whether they believe that the prolonged and repeated exposure to such content creates communicative barriers between them and their children (2019, pp. 103-104). Irrespective of any contextual factors, and without further justification as to the type of relation they draw, their study concludes that increased exposure to violent animation interferes with parent-child communication (2019, p. 105).

On the other hand, these studies also criticize animation's alien cultural and religious values, which contradict the Algerian child's own cultural and religious background. Indeed, as the bulk of animation that circulates through Arab and Algerian media outlets is either Japanese anime or Western cartoons, informed by different religious and moral value systems, these concerns are justified. They are usually raised in fear that exposure to these values may interfere with a child's cultural and psychological development. For example, when addressing the communication of different values through animated works targeted at children, Aliouat (2018, pp. 33-34), Ben Mohamed and Kasri (2018, pp. 401-402), Belgueliel (2022, p. 73), and Saidani and Feguiri (2022, pp. 139-141) warn against the dangers of exposure to the foreign values that transnational animation exhibits. According to them, such exposure may confuse the vulnerable child, whose yet-weak cultural and religious background may be disturbed by alien value systems if the editing process is not properly executed.

Despite the justified concerns raised by these studies, a major issue with approaching anime and cartoons through a media effects paradigm in Algerian academia is that, by assuming that all animation is intrinsically child-oriented, these studies tend to dismiss the importance of children's age groups. While animation continues to be

largely targeted at children, this practice usually takes into account varying age groups, to which different content is specifically tailored at the stages of production and distribution. Rather than considering age an important construct in validating claims regarding more specific groups of children, “children” in these studies are substantially treated as a homogeneous group, irrespective of the disparities in cognitive, psychological, and cultural development among different age groups. For example, while adhering to animation’s child-orientedness, Ben Mohamed includes *Tiger Mask II* (*A’nnamir Al-Muqana’*) and *Fist of the North Star* (*Saif A’nnār*) in his list of surveyed animation (2022, pp. 497-498). Although dubbed and extensively edited for appropriate content framing, these anime series include extreme depictions of violence and are originally targeted at an adult and young adult demographic in Japan.

Similarly, in studies that touch upon children’s perception of reality and their cultural and moral development, the child’s age is not given primacy when addressing these issues. Saidani and Feguri (2022, pp. 139-141) and Belgueliel’s (2022, p. 73) articles are examples of this tendency. Belgueliel especially restricts her conception of children to a group of vulnerable individuals who are unable to differentiate the real from the imaginary, without providing further details on the extent to which this applies to different age groups. As already indicated, childhood in these studies is treated as a fixed and homogeneous conception rather than a highly segmented social construct, and associating it with this essentialist view of animation by extension limits analytical approaches to it (Awan & Steemers, 2017, p. 20; 28).

Furthermore, in some experimental studies, bias can also obscure the necessity for age group differentiation. In their experimental study, Sahi and Keziz collect the responses of parents from 21 Algerian families, two-thirds of which reported a general preference among their children for violent animated works, to conclude that this preference and the difficulties in child-family communication are associated (2019, pp. 103-107). However, although the basis on which this association is built remains unexplained, it is taken for granted based on parents’ answers without further questioning about the relevance of the child’s age. The lack of consideration of age groups in such studies can be further complicated by the potential bias of parent reports on their children’s exposure to animation (Taylor & Ghaznavi, 2017, p. 966). Parent reports on their children’s exposure to violent animation may tend to downplay the contribution of other contextual factors, including but not restricted to the age of the child, in favor of amplifying the role of the practice of watching animated series and films as such in promoting problematic behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs in children.

With today’s increased global media flows, it is challenging to protect vulnerable children and teenagers from the effects that media content is bound to inflict on them. This especially applies to countries where domestic media production is scarce, leaving

imported animation as the only viable option to fill this gap. Awan and Steemers argue that in such circumstances, children in dominated cultures are more subject not only to the direct effects of objectionable media content, but also to the effects of “the tensions between different conceptualizations of childhood and types of media content” (2017, p. 20). When media content originally intended for an older audience is presented to children in the Arab world, it may have grave consequences on children exposed to it due to the improper targeting of a vulnerable audience group. Yet even when imported animation is targeted at children, Western and Japanese conceptions of childhood through which these animated productions are framed can themselves be threatening to the cultural background of the Arab, Muslim, and Algerian child. This is the case regarding the alien moral and cultural value systems, and the culturally distinctive “experience”, upon which they are constructed (Awan & Steemers, 2017, p. 21). For example, an Al-Jazeera Children’s television staff member mentions difficulties in dealing with the incessant absence of the family’s figures of authority in foreign children’s animation (2017, pp. 32-33). This usually renders the process of editing and dubbing animation for the Arab child more challenging, given the stark differences in the cultural contexts that frame this absence and the potential effects it might induce in the child with repeated exposure.

3.2 Animation and New Media Environment

The media landscape has continuously been transformed by the advent of new media technologies and platforms. Since the 1990s, the world has been increasingly digitized, and the internet has facilitated the construction of a global network that connected the world in ways that were unimaginable before. These changes have not only transformed media technologies and how content is distributed, but have also introduced new media affordances that changed how we conceptualize, access, and experience media content. Some areas in media studies are especially more crucial to study in light of these changes, including animation and children’s exposure to it within new media landscapes.

While addressing critical issues such as the effects of exposure to anime and Western cartoons is important, Algerian academic research fails to account for important contextualizing factors. This general failure to address age groups in the analysis and theorization of animation in Algeria equally springs from a failure to address the reconceptualization of foreign animation, which constitutes the bulk of what Algerian and Arab children watch. As indicated above, shaped by and shaping the discourses on animation and its audience, and enabled by the advent of new media distribution and reception venues, American cartoons and anime and their audiences were reconceptualized throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Animation in America and Japan grew primarily as commercial forms, which resonated well with a growing desire to

expand the market of animation by increasingly including less child-friendly marketable content targeted at teenagers and adults. Yet the lack of engagement with this point in Algerian academia does not reflect a complete failure to address it in the industry. Since the latter half of the 2000s, some Arab television channels have become remarkably aware of the changes in how anime was conceptualized, and therefore used scheduling practices to organize their content to target different age groups accordingly. This is an area that is hardly approached in Algerian research on animation.

With a few exceptions, another prominent discourse in Algerian studies of animation as child-oriented is increased accessibility. However, this discourse is not necessarily only related to animation alone, although our study focused on the few studies that address animation, as it remains the most popular child televised entertainment in the Arab world in general (Steemers & Sakr, 2017, p. 5). While television may be the most popular media technology among parents whose children watch animation, the gradual turn toward the use of other media technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets, personal computers, and even smart televisions, with their access to the internet) is not properly addressed in studies on animation reception and effects.

A recent paper by Belgueliel Rawya tackles the problem of values communicated through televised animation. According to her recommendations section, one solution to counter the adverse effects of exposure to these values would be prompting parents to watch television with their children (2022, p. 76). In the ideal environment that this paper supposes, the exerted parental control and guidance while watching television animation with children is sufficient to counter the transmission of negative values to the child. Indeed, Ben Crawford partly attributes research on animation's effects on the child to "attempts to regulate responsibility" for protecting the child from objectionable content (Cohen, 1997, pp. 113-114). Belgueliel's paper dismisses two important realities with regard to parent responsibility in today's media-saturated environment, nevertheless. First, with the changing practices of scheduling since the 2000s, it has become increasingly difficult to monitor the child throughout the day; this problem requires more parent and child education on the subject. Second, animation and television programs in general have become accessible not only through the television set, but also through a variety of other media technologies and online platforms. The latter issue should raise more concern, as animation accessible through the internet, for instance, can be unedited, increasing the risk of children and teenagers' exposure to inappropriate content.

On the one hand, the expansion of satellite television made possible the introduction of specialized children's entertainment channels in the Arab world during the 1990s and early 2000s. Imad Karam indicates that satellite television meant increasing vulnerability for the long-term cumulative effects of television programs on

youth as opposed to values learned from traditional institutions, including family (Karam, 2007, pp. 80-81); a case that finds its best manifestation in the effects exerted on vulnerable audience groups like children. At the same time, while animated works may be perceived as harmless child entertainment, this inaccurate conflation of the conception of animation may result in dismissing the fact that other types of animation can be broadcast for different audiences, albeit through scheduling practices that aim to reduce children's exposure to unwanted content. A useful illustration of this case can be found in the case of Spacetoon incorporating a late-night block called SpacePower, whose animation is primarily targeted at a teenage and adult audience (اليغشي, 2025, para. 2). While the block is scheduled at 10:30 pm Saudi Arabia time, time zone disparities render its broadcast during earlier times in other parts of the region problematic, as it risks children's exposure to violent animation (mostly anime).

Some other studies successfully acknowledge television as merely one among different media trajectories through which animation is made accessible. For example, Samia Abbassa considers children's exposure to animation on both television and YouTube channels (2022, pp. 140-141). Nevertheless, she notably fails to address the relevant issues of the new affordances that YouTube (particularly YouTube Kids) and other streaming platforms give to the animated form. Animation streamed through online non-Arab and unofficial Arab platforms is less safe for the child, given the absence of clear guidelines of regulations of censorship, and the lack of adherence to the cultural value system of the Arab child's culture. Despite the risk of encountering inappropriate content on television, the risk remains lower due to editing practices. When the author considers YouTube Kids a safer option for children, she nonetheless misses the complaints often issued by parents regarding inappropriate advertisements, and, equally, children's content that still contradicts the moral and religious values of the Muslim Arab or Algerian child (Alqahtani, Yafooz, Alsaeedi, Syed, & Alluhaibi, 2023, pp. 24-26).

4. CONCLUSION

This paper critically reviewed some Algerian academic studies on animation framed by the essential perspective of the child-orientedness of animation. Given Algeria and the Arab world's entertainment industry's dependence on foreign animation to fill the gaps of domestic production in the region, the paper's objective was to assess the extent to which Algerian research on animation is consistent with the reconceptualization of foreign animation's content and original target audience. Such an evaluation is necessary given animation's persistent framing as child-oriented in the region at a time when the imported foreign animation is increasingly produced for older audiences.

The reviewed studies' view animation through a media effects perspective. Indeed, this approach to children's media studies is valuable for this area as it helps understand how animation, particularly foreign animation, influences a child's cognitive, behavioral, and cultural development. Nevertheless, most of these studies fail to address two important aspects. First, they fail to engage with animation's audience segmentation and with the importance of accounting for varying age groups even among children themselves. Second, they ignore the fact that the transformation of the media landscape led to reconstructing animation and its audience in exporting countries, but also to complicating the question of accessibility to animated content in the new media environment.

The former is especially important as age is a crucial marker of the development of the child, according to which certain media content may be suggested or advised against (D'Arma & Steemers, 2010, p. 115). Regarding the latter failure, its persistence can interfere with understanding two major points. On the one hand, if not properly addressed where necessary, the research may not grasp how the changing media landscape has contributed to creating new outlets for non-child-oriented animation to be distributed (Denison, 2015, pp. 59-63). An essentialist conception of animation as child-oriented leads to failure to address the core issues that are rooted in increased content abundance and accessibility in this case. On the other hand, it can also obscure how the media landscape, which enabled adult animation to circulate more freely on occasion, can itself be strategically employed to protect children from accessing inappropriate animation, or at least educating them and their parents on the matter, a point that is alluded to the study of Aliouat (2018, p. 36), for instance.

Future research is called upon to take a constructivist approach to animation, especially regarding foreign animation. Such an approach will enable more focused and adequate analyses of issues related to child exposure to animation. Addressing these points in future research is urged, as it will not only advance studies of media effects of animation on children alone, but also on teenagers and adults, where relevant. Additionally, it will yield significantly applicable results that the relevant industry will benefit from in its practices of production, distribution, and exhibition, particularly regarding the necessity to address the unattended question of age-rating systems and parent and child education regarding media content exposure. (البيغشي, 2025)

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