

**RETHINKING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMEDY
ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA; A STUDY OF
MARK ANGEL SKITS**

**¹Okoye, Chukwudi Michael PhD, and
²Chinaza Jacintha Okenyi**

^{1,2} Department of Theatre and Film Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

Corresponding email: mc.okoye@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Children learn often from what they see and hear either through modelling their parents' or peers' behaviour, reading books, or viewing movies. Recently, the internet has become a major source of entertainment for children and adults alike. This study, however, focuses on identifiable negative social-cultural behaviour portrayed in the contents of online comedy skits by video producers who may or may not have had formal training in film narratives but see social media as a means for disseminating artistic content without necessarily putting in context, the development needs of young viewers who are merely attracted to these various artistic creations churned out on different social media platforms. The research offers suggestions on how children experience the world around them using the concept of Jensen Eric's *Arts with the Brain in Mind* as the theoretical framework, and employing the *Emmanuella* and *MarkAngel* comedy skits as case studies for analysis. The content analysis and case study approach of the mixed research method was also employed in this paper. The study recommends that parents provide needed guidance in using smartphones as an alternative means of relaxation and entertainment. There is a serious need to adopt balance in the engagement of creative activities that can engender qualitative psychosocial development in children rather than spending these

passive leisure times in the consumption of uncensored internet comedy drama skits.

Introduction

The impact of social media as a present phenomenon in our world today is not in doubt. Social media represents a social structure that displays the different cultural backgrounds of individuals, communities, and organisations and how they communicate. Indeed, this is made possible every day through technological advancements, which have opened up further the ease of communication and, to a large extent, influence. Technology has shown rapid development through the introduction of small communication devices that can be used to access social networks anytime and anywhere. These gadgets include computers, Tablets, laptops and even mobile phones (Shabnoor Siddiqui and Tajinder Singh 71).

It would appear that social media is connected to almost everything that humans interact with today, education, health, finance, entertainment, and most especially for social interactions and connectivity. The roles social media plays are numerous; in the last decade, it has been utilized as a platform for individuals to voice out and discuss their issues and opinions as well as exchange information, ideas, materials, etc. Among these social media platforms are “Tech Giants” such as *Facebook*, *LinkedIn*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *WeChat*, *WhatsApp* and many others which have arguably influenced the value systems of many individuals, especially younger members of society.

This study, however, is focused on the impact of social media comedy skits on child development in Nigeria and how they influence development in the transition from childhood to adulthood. The discourse on social media's exposure, use and long-term effect on young minds would continue to dominate intellectual conversations for years to come. Indeed, while some scholars argue that early exposure to technological devices capable

of accessing the virtual space, may help the child compete favourably in the 21st century, others propose that such actions may further inhibit proper psychosocial development in children. Jonathan Glazzard and Samuel Stones observe that, “evidence suggests that social media can impact detrimentally on children and young people’s mental health. At the same time, social media use can be beneficial and have positive effects. (1). Furthermore, Barbara Kolucki, and Dafna Lemish opine that,

There is also great anxiety associated with media’s ability to encourage destructive behaviours, perpetuate stereotypes, and lead to a deterioration of moral values...depending on the content we fill them with...and the individual characteristics of the children using them. Research around the world suggests that good-quality media products produced for children ... can effectively promote a host of development goals (9).

The study, thus, evaluates the impact of social media comedy skits such as the *MarkAngel’s* Comedy series and how it influences children’s behavioural, socio-emotional, cognitive and physical development. The research employs an analysis of the character of *Emmanuella*; a stereotyped character known for her hilarious and mischievous acts carried out on adults and peers alike. The study will draw attention to the main character's performance which is the major cause of the amusement in the skits.

Scholars have argued that uncensored social media content could be responsible for impaired and misconstrued learning among developing children. This challenge is evident in the retinue of problems that could hamper holistic development in children. The myriad of scenarios in this regard may consist of but is not limited to excessive exposure to social media content at home could increase the chances of poor cognitive and problem-solving skills, lack of parental guidance in the kinds of social media content

children have access to; the disregard of social network policy on age censorship by children and how it can affect their self-esteem as well as increase conditions of anxiety, stress, depression and Cyber-bullying; and the unique ability of social media comedy skits to persuade and connect its audience on social matters thereby amplifying opportunities for the dissemination of wrong and mischievous information, placing children at risk of moral misconduct and poor development.

It can be deduced that development in children can be approached from the two perspectives of maturation and learning. This study, however takes the approach of child development from the aspect of learning. Eric Jensen in his view classifies learning appropriately when he states:

Learning is commonly divided into two broad areas. One is explicit, what I call “labelled learning”—what we commonly read, write, and talk about. It includes textbook learning, videos, lecture, pictures, and dialogue. The other type is implicit, which includes “hands-on” approaches, more trial-and-error, habits, role plays, life experience, drama, experiential learning, games, and active learning. (74)

Learning takes place every day, every time and everywhere, especially in the lives of children. Children learn at birth and continually, even at a more rapid pace in their early years. This learning takes place in stages as children develop. According to John D. Bransford et al., for the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council, it is reported that:

...a great deal of children’s learning is self-motivated and self-directed; other people play major roles as guides in fostering the development of learning in children. Such guides include other children and adults (caretakers,

parents, teachers, coaches, etc.). But not only people can serve as guides; so, too, can power tools and cultural artefacts, notably television, books, videos, and technological devices of many kinds.

In development and learning, children acquire cognitive skills, attitudes, and new physical skills.

Their assertion above means that children's development results from the many ways they learn to understand, process, connect, and interpret information from external factors. Therefore, social media comedy viewership as we see it today assumes a critical reference point in child behaviour and development when constantly exposed to it. Numerous researches have indicated that young children are among the high users of mobile devices, especially at home. But this view does not imply that social media or any other media sources are bad in themselves. Indeed, there are also indicators that it can contribute to broad learning and knowledge acquisition.

The Influence of Social Media on the Cognitive Development of Children

Children occupy a unique place in society because they guarantee the continued existence of human society. It is, therefore, imperative that attention be paid to their educational and developmental needs to stimulate healthy and balanced psychosocial practices and values. The advent of social media buzz on the Nigerian scene appears, at best to create a grey area on the benefits to the cognitive development of children. Indeed, a holistic understanding of the psychology behind short dramatic skits on social media and their general appeal, especially to young viewers worldwide, remains critical to the discourse of cognitive development in children today. Andie Phoon opines that:

Almost every individual's first instinct is to reach for their phone and check through their notifications and social

media accounts. They wake up scrolling through them, liking pictures, commenting, sharing, tweeting, etcetera...Social media has become a big part of our lives, and most of us cannot live without it. We spend every waking second engaging with it, learning and receiving new information, ideas, and concepts through it. This has shaped our culture, our society, and, perhaps, even our general view of life. And in the moments where we are not attached to it, we react in ways that are similar to the symptoms of withdrawal. People hardly consider or ponder about why we feel that way, and how heavily social media impacts us as a society. (1)

There are key points to deduce from the submission of Phoon because they form critical points of discussion on the impact of social media in content and context. These points are to be considered to fully grasp the impacts of social media on children's cognitive development. They include that social media activities appear to be mainly for connecting and sharing ideas and experiences of events through videos and pictures. However, due to its addictive nature, it can also be a source of low self-esteem for individuals seeking attention or a sense of validation online.

These above thoughts can be said to have shaped how social media content creators and producers, especially those producing comedy skits, perceive their audience and viewers. There seems to be a drive to exploit the advantage the addictive nature of social media has on individuals who view such content, not necessarily minding the ages of the viewing audience. Social media is not only growing in popularity but is also dynamic in influencing the mind considering the number of viewers and the hours they spend on various devices. It could be on any device (e.g. smartphone, computer, tablet, etc.). These online platforms have become a daily ritual and for many people are essentially unavoidable in modern society. On average, people check their social media multiple times

a day on different devices, affecting how they think and carry out their daily routines. Because of the influential role social media play in society, understanding the psychosocial mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human thought and action is of considerable importance, especially in the development of children.

Children's experiences of the world are largely culture-specific. In an adult-dominated society like Nigeria, children are not so socially empowered and may not even have a voice, reflecting their overall development. But through drama, especially comedy, they gain knowledge of different perspectives of the world through the characters. Eric Jensen in his theory of "*Arts with the Brain in Mind*" makes it more lucid when he asserts that:

Dramatic arts can facilitate the development of emotional intelligence in children because they meet the criteria for facilitating those essential social and emotional skills. They create face-to-face interactions; and they require managing feelings, expressing verbal and nonverbal requests, delaying gratification, managing self-talk, problem-solving, identifying feelings in others, resolving conflicts, and more. All of these activate the student brain's pleasure centre, making arts a genuine source of joy day after day. (80).

Comedy can be seen as a great source of inspiration that can influence their behaviour and development because it is most common on the internet, unlike other forms of dramatic enactments seen on social media. Caty Borum Chattoo in her "*The Laughter Effect: How Comedy Works (To Change the World)*" opines that:

Comedy's persuasiveness is a central element that connects with social change. Learning more is not necessarily a precursor to developing a favourable attitude or taking action. While comedy and entertainment are not the

dominant media genres for audiences to learn purely factual information, they are important vehicles to fuel audiences' attitudes and perceptions. As individuals enjoy the comedy message and the messenger, they are less likely to scrutinize and counter-argue the information, which improves the conditions for persuasion. (1-2)

It is paramount to note that comedy is a powerful source of influence and means of communication. At the same time, the need to engage the children in social problems is profound and taken seriously as a method to bring them into social issues. Children's experiences of the world are largely culture-specific. However, as noted by Jensen, comedy is:

important for enhancing student learning. Reading, counting, speaking, and problem-solving are all maturation correlated...because play usually has the recipe for brain growth built-in: challenge, novelty, feedback, coherence, and time. Students often do theatre and play games precisely because they are just challenging enough, with a novel twist here and lots of feedback. (76)

It can then be deduced from the above words that drama and, indeed, comedy which is the genre discussed in this research, can have tremendous effects on children because "people share comedy to create shared cultural moments and display personal identity, amplifying serious messages" (Coty BorumChattoo 2).

The porous nature of internet access therefore, and the impact of comedy skits may likely have less desirable effects on the overall development and learning of children, partly because the internet is loosely regulated or and many media products and content are not censored by any specific person or the parents of the children. Furthermore, many social media content creators and producers utilize their platforms in ways that express their values,

preferences and knowledge base which leaves a large margin of error, especially with young viewers.

Implications of Language to Child Development in *Markangel Skits*

Mark Angel is a young Nigerian in his early thirties. He is a comedian, scriptwriter and video producer. He produces the Mark Angel comedy skits alongside his cousin Emmanuella Samuel who also plays major roles in his skits. His skits are viewed on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms. Observations reveal that the bulk of the Markangel series deals with themes of economic woes, sibling rivalry, get-rich-quick schemes, moral decadence and so on, which appears to make it appealing to a cross-section of Nigerians.

This thrust of the analysis of this study investigated the impact of *Markangel* comedy skits on the behaviour, attitude and overall development of children in Awka South, Anambra state, Nigeria. The study population was made up of selected urban parents within Awka South, Lagos. Over 150 questionnaires were sent to respondents. Not all the questionnaires sent were returned. In addition, six focus group discussions with parents were conducted to elicit other salient responses about the impact of *Markangel* comedy skit on children to supplement the questionnaire data. The research analysed and interpreted the questionnaire results alongside the focus group results simultaneously and was appropriately integrated. The general finding made from the survey and analysis is that many have various ways of relating to online drama skits. It was further observed that many of the parents do not watch the *Markangel* comedy skits but are very familiar with the names “Emmanuella” and “Success” alongside “Mark Angel”. In most cases other parents who watch the online comedy skits gave their reasons for watching it, saying it is entertaining, serving as a great source of stress relief for most of the parents after work. Some respondents

related to the online drama skits on a different level probably because it connects with their everyday lives for them the approach is edutainment. More so, the comic nature of *Markangel* comedy skits and the diversity of language used in the drama could be a possible reason for the high-interest listenership rate. However, at the time of this survey, the majority of the parents complained that their children's mischievous behaviours and especially their language are being modulated by such online drama series and the likes due to the excessively identifiable negative social-cultural behaviour portrayed by the children, such as "lack of respect for elders, derogatory language usage by children in Mark Angel comedy towards grownups which is a reflection of what is witnessed among children and teens in the community today as seen in the images below in Mark Angel Comedy Episode 57 titled "*Three Men*":



Plate One: Uncle Mark admonishing some young boys in the image by the right



Plate Two: Young boys speaking rudely to Uncle Mark

Furthermore, in another episode, titled "*For Real*" in episode 137; Emmanuella speaks derogatively to Uncle Mark without respect as seen in the images below:



Plate Three: Emmanuella speaking derogatively to Uncle Mark



Plate Four: Uncle Mark embarrassed at the derogative remarks of Emmanuella

The images above evidently portray negative signs of moral values which are communicated through MarkAngel comedy skits. Therefore, in the bid to evaluate the impact of *Markangel* comedy skit, (54.6%) of the respondents agreed that such online drama skits had a direct or indirect positive impact on children which means that more than half of the respondents recognised the impact of uncensored internet drama skits and the likes, on children in general. This could serve as a pointer to the power which social media and indeed online drama skits, possess in enhancing or impeding a child's behaviour and overall development through its subtle approach.

In administering the data collection instrument for this study, over 150 copies of questionnaires were distributed among the respondents. This number was chosen because the sample size was a fair representation of the entire study population. The qualitative data were interpreted and analysed per the study's objectives. Deductions were drawn from the results concerning the subject of investigation. However, copies of the questionnaires were distributed to parents living in Awka South local government area in Anambra state.

The method was used for presenting the data in the table, after which interpretation and analysis will be done, which will be concluded with the discussion of findings. Over 150

questionnaires were administered, 150 copies were retrieved, and four copies were void for inconsistency in response and non-compliance with the instructions. This leaves the researcher with 146 copies. The following research findings from the questionnaire are further presented and analysed below. The research considered equal distribution among gender to give both sexes an equal chance without bias since it was assumed that different sexes might exhibit different perceptions of internet use and viewership of online content.

Table 1: The Impact of *Markangel* comedy skit on Children’s Behaviour and Development

Respondents	Frequency	Per cent
High Impact	82	54.6%
Average Impact	40	26.7%
Low Impact	24	16%
Invalid Questionnaires	4	2.7%
Total Questionnaires Retrieved	150	100%

The table below shows that respondents who hold the view that *Markangel* comedy skits have a high impact on children’s behaviour and development were 54.6% and those on average were 26.7%, while those with a contrary view of low impact were 16%, while the invalid questionnaires are 2.7%.

This means that most parents are aware of the socio-cultural implication of online uncensored drama skits that are likely to impede their children’s behaviours and overall development which can be a source of influence for negative behaviour modulations

among children and teens. However, the majority of the respondents complained of not being able to monitor what their children watch online during the day when they return from school because they go to work to attend to their daily business.

Summary of Findings

The study confirmed that social media unequivocally influences children's behaviours, realities and overall development as they grow up. This paper analysed data relating to the impact of social media drama series on child development using *Markangel* comedy skits as a case study. The study population was a random selection of parents living in a semi-urban area who are businessmen and women or office workers within Awka South, Anambra state. The research simultaneously analysed and interpreted the questionnaire results alongside the focus group results and was appropriately integrated. Most respondents said they watch social drama series while at home and their children also have access to such online content. It was observed that the rate of watching social media drama skits is higher during the weekends than on weekdays. Most parents watch social media drama skits with their children at weekends, mainly for entertainment. However, some respondents also noted that their children watch social media drama skits in their absence during the weekdays. The research found that there is an impact of social media drama skits on the behaviour and development of children concerning acquired language, behaviour and role types presented by these online drama skits. The media generates a scheme of relationships and influences between it and the individual who analyses the information provided and contained outside the text. Idle consequences and ramifications of social media relate not merely to how online events are perceived but also to a multitude of cultural influences that operate through social media. Social media is viewed as having the power to profoundly shape perceptions of the social world and manipulate actions in subtle but

highly effective ways. The debate over social media is in many respects being portrayed as a critical battleground of a larger “culture war” in the continuing struggle to define the factors that shape the broad social order of the society. Within social media, drama skits have emerged as an especially strong force on children and a tool capable of influencing their perceptions and cultural orientations. Children also form part of society therefore the overall effects of social media on society cumulatively affect them. This is predicated upon its ability to reach a wide audience, which often sends a strong and influential message. It is the persuasiveness of a medium such as the Internet that enables it to reach the target audience. Internet broadcasting is not censored and lacks control over the content displayed thereby influencing society. The way people engage with social media content, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic era, has drastically exposed more children and teens to illicit content on the internet, causing a cultural shift in social media use by them.

This research, therefore, studied the following theories of media effect on society as integral to looking at the impact of social media drama skits on children’s behaviour and overall development.

Conclusion

Drama has a profound influence on human conditions and culture since for many children culture is something they partake in through electronic and social media. The production and distribution of social media products is concentrated in a few hands. In Nigeria, social media have an impact on children in Awka South, Anambra state because they consume a lot of online content, particularly comedy-drama series like *Markangel* comedy skits. It can be concluded that this predominantly Nigerian social media content has an impact on the choice of lifestyle for the selected sample of children in Awka because of the contact hours and their content. Children at this developmental stage are also active

participants when watching television and exhibit primary involvement where they fully concentrate on consuming the social media drama skits, sitting down solely to watch them. Almost all children expose themselves to comedy-drama series for different durations of time. Most children watch internet content during weekends and school holidays, at home and parents are usually not involved in discussing the content with their children. This study reveals that children who watch these social media content have minimal parental guidance. This raises questions as to some of the interpretations and lifestyles that emerge when children watch these internet contents in isolation and with no proper guiding principles. Studies have proved that what we watch has a profound influence on how we make our lifestyle choices and this is especially true for more amenable children. Most children found it normal to watch online comedy skits while eating and a smaller number while doing work at home. Some of the reasons children cited for watching social media drama skits were entertainment and to pass time and humour. The study established that there is equally bad behaviour and language usage that children are exposed to in the online drama skits that they constantly watched. It is important then for parents to provide alternative means of relaxation and entertainment rather than the passive leisure of watching internet comedy drama skits for example going for a walk or a bike ride, painting, learning to play a musical instrument, reading together, listening to music, talk, play a game and enjoy each other's company.

Therefore, parents should try to engage children in more interactive and family activities. They should watch the social media dramas their children watch or preview and use them to discuss inappropriate material or unacceptable behaviour or lifestyle. This can also help prepare children to decide on their own, whether about what they watch or how to make smart choices about lifestyle and behaviour.

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