

Effects of Television Soaps on Students' Academic Performance: Evidence from Uganda

By

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Abstract

Despite the diffusion of new media technologies, Television is still a key entertainment and information medium for the youths and it occupies much of their time alongside the other activities. Although there are numerous studies carried out in the developed world about TV and academic performance, this area is still novel in Uganda. This therefore, compelled the researcher to write scholarly paper on the effects of television soaps on academic performance of students in Uganda. This paper focuses on how TV soaps viewing affects students' academic performance and strategies for regulating TV soap viewing with a view of improving academic performance in secondary school level. This paper adopted a qualitative approach and its data was based on secondary sources and content analysis of relevant documents. Major findings indicated that television viewership stopped students from completing homework assignments, reading and engaging in creative plays. Similarly, TV soaps depicted bad characters such as; fraudsters, drug addicts, rapists, murderers and since young people look at them as celebs, they copy their behaviour and consequently became stubborn, unruly and some dropped out of school. However, the paper also envisaged that some TV soaps are good in society as they can teach certain skills and thus should not be banned but regulated through censorship and guiding youngsters on how to watch operas. This study recommended that teachers, parents and TV soap producers should guard learners against the negative impacts of TV soaps towards students.

Key words: Television soaps, academic performance, Students, Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

According to Cox (2013) and Mittel (2009) the term soap operas is a serial drama and suspense on television (TV) which features related story lines about the lives of multiple characters. The name '*soap opera*' originated from the drama which was initially being sponsored by companies that manufactured soap as well as detergents. Further to that, after the introduction of such fiction they were relayed on TV during day time and were mainly watched by an audience of house maids normally engaged in cleaning using soap, hence the inception of the name soap opera. Soap operas are very

attractive to viewers. They work with a continuous open narrative and each episode ends with a melodramatic apprehensive event and a promise that it will continue (Mittel 2009). Its worthy noting that each soap opera episode may feature some of the current story lines intertwined with flash backs from the previous episodes. Soap operas usually emphasizes family life, personal relationships, sexual dramas, emotional and moral conflicts as well as coverage of topical issues set in familiar environment (Cox, 2013).

Nevertheless, television as mass medium was created in the 1920s with the advent of information technology that transformed the world. One of the programmes that was first to be relayed on TVs were soap operas. Soap operas have attractive features; also have a long-life span hence attracting a wide following. In United States a soap opera entitled 'young and restless,' which was first relayed in 1988 and is still being relayed up to the present moment has 5 million viewers (Mittel, 2009). Despite the explosion of new media technologies, such as the Internet, smartphones, and computers, which are accessible to almost every segment of society, young people still spend their free time in front of their screens watching television soaps at a considerable rate (Muyingo & Kirik, 2018). For instance, the U.S Time Use Survey (2014) revealed that on an average day in 2014, nearly everyone aged 15 and over engaged in some sort of leisure activity such as watching TV and socializing. Survey results showed that men spent more time in the aforementioned activities 6 hours more than women at 5.2 hours. Men spent 3 hours per day watching TV, while women spent 2.6 hours (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). These statistics therefore, implied that Watching TV was the leisure activity that occupied the most time, accounting for more than half of leisure time of the US young people. Remarkably, in Uganda we have popular TV soap operas like Bade Acche, Daniella, Deception, Ramayan, Bweyongedde, Brave woman, Scandal, Obufumbo Bwa'bato, Be careful with my heart among others; being watched by people aged 15-20 years who are mainly secondary school students. This however, prompted the researcher to find out how television soap opera affects students' academic performance.

Gove (1993) defined students' performance as the standard to which someone/student does something such as a job or examination. Students' performance is the degree/extent to which the students are able to achieve the stated goals/objectives of

learning in any given society. The fulfillment of those goals is usually manifested through completing schooling, improved test scores as well as the acquisition of the relevant life skills. It is also evident in learners who are engaged in a lesson, those who sustain concentration as well as making significant progress in class (Rutter & Maugham, 2002).

TV as a channel of communication transmits information in some way, which shapes or forms to a large number of people (Johnson and Cohen, 2007). It can be watched via the internet, cellular phones as well as little pocket TV sets. It is therefore everywhere and for everyone. It can be used as an educative tool to enhance academic performance and it be used other ways and hence become destructive. But with populace of TV viewership, scholars such as, Richmond (1992) points out that some adolescents watching TV soap operas were not mature enough to distinguish between fantasy and reality, particularly when the former was presented as reality. When adolescents get TV drama taste it becomes difficult to keep them away from it. The viewing of such drama impacts on the adolescents lifelong time management skills, whereby those in school may fail to manage time well, leading to high levels of stress which in turn affects their schooling and academic performance in general. Also, to note certain characters in such drama model unique behavior which inspire the adolescents. This view is strengthened by the observational or socio learning theory of (Bandura 1986) as cited by Spencer (2008: 56) *A student learns through observing the behavior of other people, things or objects (TV videos, movies, dressing) ...The people or things we observe are called role models and we learn from them by imitation. Observational learning does not require direct reinforcement. It involves watching other people and it is called vicarious learning.*

According to Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1998), *television is a powerful medium that can influence a person's attitude and help shape their perceptions on a wide variety of topics.* Television gives a coherent picture of what exists, what is important, what is related to what, and what is right. In today's society, and with the growing use of the internet, media is omnipresent— making its influence even greater. Despite the availability of media, Nielsen (2009) reports that student's still watch television more

than they engage in new media. Among their favorite programs include movies, comedies, soap operas, foreign programming, science-fiction, animi, and cartoons.

It's worth to point out that media technologies have become actors in people's everyday life as they occupy a bigger portion of their leisure time for purposes of self-development and entertainment (Muyingo & Kirik, 2018). Although the TV as a media is advantageous in education, entertainment, information relaying, advertising, public relations as well as propaganda value, its uncontrolled use is likely to have an effect on people in age group 15-20 years which end product needs to be established. According to the World Youth Report (2003), young people in the developed world spend an average of about two hours daily in front of the television and their engagement in active leisure such as drama, sports and the arts. Thus, the effects of TV soap operas on the academic performance of secondary school students the most devoted viewers for such drama needs to be established hence the need for this scholarly paper.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a qualitative approach and it was based on secondary data analysis where by the researcher reviewed literature related to the following specific objectives: To find out how TV soap opera viewing affects students' academic performance; Exploring strategies for regulating TV soap opera viewing with a view of improving academic performance. Literature from journals and books was reviewed. Some of the journals include: The Journal of Education and Practice ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online) Vol 3, No 7, 2012; Journal Media and Communication Studies. Vol. 2(7), pp. 154-158, ISSN 2141 – 2545 August 2010; Television's impact on high school achievement. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 50(3), 340-359, among others

RESULTS

Studies on soap opera viewing and its effects on students' academic performance produce varying results. Some studies found no effect; others found significant effect, while some pointed out an effect in some subjects such as reading, mathematics as well as writing at lower level (Gaddy, 1996). In other studies, the relationship between both

variables begun after watching for more than 11 hours a week that is a moderate viewer. Therefore, the results are categorized into both negative and positives effects of TV soap opera on students' academic performance as presented below;

NEGATIVE IMPACT OF TV SOAPS ON ACADEMIC PERFORMNACE

According to Johnson and Cohen, (2007) soap opera viewing affects students' academic performance in three different ways; shaping bad habits through observational learning, creating prejudice as well as stereotypes and taking a big portion of valuable time meant for studies. Soap operas have attracted a large, popular and loyal base and they allow a multiplicity of interpretations to suit diverse tastes of the dominant class.

Additionally in Uganda, students' exposure to violence operas for instance action movies, increases aggressive behavior and misconduct in schools. Some of those have violence, inappropriate sexuality as well as offensive language and when watched by adolescents especially students they tend to copy such immoral acts and become indiscipline in schools consequently affecting their studies (Johnson and Cohen, 2007).

Furthermore, some students in Uganda engage in risky behavior such as unprotected sex, drug abuses as well as usage of alcohol and such vices are at variance with studies and this leads to an effect on schooling. Messages like "Real men drink beer" are a message found in some operas. Johnson and Cohen (2007) observed that TV creates prejudice and affects society making it unduly fearful, creating stereotypes which affected people with personality disorders, hence in long run it affects students' academic performance.

When considering total television consumption, Hancox et al. (2005) argued that watching television reduced from the time a student could otherwise spend completing homework assignments, reading, engaging in creative play, or simply resting. Their research, as well as that of Potter 's (1987), confirmed their hypothesis, concluding that the more hours a student watched television the greater the impact it would have on their academic performance.

Potter (1987) further found that students, in grades eight to 12, who watched more than 30 hours a week, demonstrated lower skills (I.Q.) and lower science and social

studies achievement. This relationship was most prevalent when students watched primetime soap operas, movies, sports, cartoons, and music videos; noting that sports and cartoons had the strongest negative effects.

Ridley-Johnson et al. (1983) also summarized that the total number of hours watched by students in high school negatively impacted their I.Q scores and their reading grades. Studies showed that excessive television viewing was associated with a lower level of educational attainment by high school students. Although the above studies pointed out the relationship between hours of viewing and academic performance of students they tended to capitalize on the entire television as a media without breaking down the programs being relayed on TV.

The studies of Gaddy (1996), Hancox et al. (2005) found that the total time a student spends watching television is just one of several factors that can impact academic performance. Television content and achievement type can also be attributed to a student's academic success. Despite these additional factors, most findings indicate that there is a negative relationship between the two, with some research suggesting that television can positively impact on academic performance.

POSITIVE IMPACT OF TV SOAPS ON ACADEMIC PERFORMNACE

Although most research has identified a negative relationship between television viewing and academic achievement, there are few studies that have reported that soap opera consumption can be beneficial. For example, Ridley-Johnson et al. (1983) were among the first researchers to consider how soaps' content may affect academic achievement of students. They measured seven different types of television shows found in soaps: comedy, mystery/adventure, sports, and family, game, police/detective, and cartoon, and found that soap viewing preference was linked to increased academic skills. High school students who watched soaps with academic related content programming performed better overall academically.

Similarly, Hancox et al. (2005) revealed that —television is an extremely effective form of communication that has the potential to introduce children to a much wider range of experiences and ideas than would be possible.

For instance, in Uganda, TV soaps act as a window for many children into the world of adults, enabling them to get valuable information. The (soap) series forms an occasion to get information and to reflect, on the ways in which social conflicts are, presumably, created and resolved, but also on the ways in which people are represented and dressed. Students discuss this with their parents or friends and subjectively a feeling is created that daily soaps are a sort of education programme. In virtual role-play situations girls and boys participate in the plots and characters and try to find out how they would have acted and how the narrative might continue.

Outstandingly, Min and Arvin (1992) indicate that operas if watched under good guidance help students to model appropriate behavior. Citing a Liu-Huifang a character in a Chinese opera Ke Wang who was warm hearted, caring, traditional in character as well as being highly moral, the authors observed that Lui- Huifang highly inspired many Chinese students, the common saying ‘please be like Lui-Huifang’ was developed in China, due to his role modeless.

DISCUSSION

Since its inauguration, television has garnered significant attention from researchers for its presumed ability to impact the academic achievement of students (Gove, 1996). Though research has been conducted in hopes to find a straightforward relationship between television viewing and student achievement, it has been concluded that the relationship between the two is quite complex. For instance, in Uganda, television viewing has been credited with helping students increase their level of learning and it’s also been blamed as a contributing factor to lower academic achievement. In the same line scholars such as Hancox et al. (2005) believed that —television is an extremely effective form of communication that has the potential to introduce children to a much wider range of experiences and ideas than would be possible. On the other hand, much of the content of children’s television programming is entertainment and probably of low educational value.

It is worth noting that soaps can be an effective teaching tool when it is explicitly designed to do so. As Hancox et al. (2005) indicated that watching soap opera with educational related subject matter can enhance school readiness among children and increase their academic performance in school. More so, Potter (1987) extended on the benefits of soap opera watching; declaring that it does not negatively affect the academic achievement of adolescents if viewing does not exceed 10 hours a week. At this threshold, viewing is considered constructive and positively affects academic achievement.

Remarkably, there are three categories of soap opera viewers; the heavy viewers, moderate viewers as well as the light viewers. The light viewers watch operas on average of 1-10 hours a week, the moderates it was 11-20 hours a week, while the heavy ones it was over 21 hours a week (Johnson and Smailes, 2002). Watching, on average, just 2.43 hours to 3.13 hours a day, was linked to negative academic outcomes; just as watching more than 35 hours a week was associated to low academic achievement. Zavodny (2006) further reported that every additional hour of television watched per week is associated with a decline in test scores. In general, these findings concluded that a negative relationship exists between the two, even if it is a weak one.

However, Mittel (2009) indicated that students who watch TV for 27 hours a week or more encroach on study time and this in turn impacted upon their academic performance. Mittel (2009) supports this observation by stating that on average a student's private study time was 8 hours a week, hence if a student was a heavy viewer of 27 hours a week the ratio of TV viewing and private study becomes 3:1 which was too low and likely to affect academic performance. Mittel (2009) points out the impact of heavy TV watching on students' academic performance. But there is a need for more evidence on what programs were being watched by such students. Mittel's study seems to give a general picture on TV viewing which includes the entire programme line up on TV taking into account other items such as news. Moreover, it should be observed that the study was inconclusive. How much is '*much*'? TV watching is part of leisure. But there were students not watching TV but spending the same amount of their time on other

leisure activities which in turn could affect their academic performance. This implies that there were other factors that affected the academic performance not necessarily TV.

Remarkably, the fact that there are two divergent views about the TV impact on academic performance and authors disagree with one another on the effect of soap opera on academic performance enriches this academic debate. However, it should be noted that it is a subjective and biased view to refer to all operas as being bad. The limitation with such a view is that it ignores the fact that some operas provide information on education, hygiene as well as reproductive health issues some of which could improve students' academic performance.

CONCLUSION

Basing on the findings and discussions of this paper, TV soap is a double edge sword in that it negatively and positively affects academic performance of school children depending on its usage. For example, school children can imitate behaviors of bad characters watched and in contrast, they can adopt most of what they watched on television like some technical skill and English language. This paper therefore, concludes that there is a need for the government and parents to guide children towards useful TV watching habits; they should know what their children watch when and how.

Parents should have TV programming password locks to limit the content children can view on television. Keeping television sets and computers in the most-used rooms in the home not in a bedroom or private places. If a parent is not sure of the local cinema hall's movies, he/she should not allow their children to go there. Parents must be friendly to their children as this helps them know what their children are doing.

Similarly, in Uganda the Uganda Communication Commission (UCC) should set mechanisms to enforce the laws on soap screening and watching all over country. For students (boys and girls) who watch daily soaps for a third of their life during weekdays, programs become an important aspect of socialization. Not only does this require a high level of responsibility by TV soap producers towards this age group, but it also necessitates intense reflection about media-and gender specific consequences. Therefore,

teachers in high schools have to be cautious of this age group, sensitive on gender and hence provide adequate guidance and counseling services to students.

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