



A Phenomenological Examination of Children's Experience of Cartoons

Abstract

Long before they develop the vocabulary to explain what they feel, children are already living inside the cartoon world laughing, fearing, hoping, and wondering alongside characters that exist nowhere except in color and sound. Despite how central cartoons are to contemporary childhood, scholarly attention has rarely paused to ask what children themselves experience when they watch them. This is the gap the present study sets out to address through phenomenology particularly the tradition inaugurated by Edmund Husserl and developed by thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Max van Manen. This is with regards to how children perceive animated characters, engage their imaginations, construct meaning, and how the social and cultural worlds they inhabit shape what cartoons mean for them. The problem this study responded to is both philosophical and practical particularly how cartoons tends toward behavioral, cognitive, or media-effects frameworks of children. This study argued that cartoons are not merely entertainment or pedagogical tools but are, for children, genuine phenomenological encounters with imaginative worlds that carry real existential and cultural weight.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Lived Experience, Childhood, Cartoons, Meaning-Making.

Ikemesit John Nkanta

Department of Philosophy,

Faculty of Arts,

University of Uyo.

Phone: +2348089357010

[ORCID: 0009-0002-0624-1503](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0624-1503)

Corresponding Author's Email:

ikemesitjnkanta@uniuyo.edu.ng

Date Received: 15th May, 2026

Date Accepted: 25th June, 2026

Introduction

Cartoons have been part of children's daily lives for several decades, and their influence on how children think, feel, and make sense of the world around them is difficult to ignore. From early Saturday morning television broadcasts to the on-demand streaming platforms that now dominate children's media consumption, animated content has consistently occupied a central place in childhood. Despite these, all the attention that researchers have given to what cartoons do to children, whether they make them aggressive, whether they

teach them letters and numbers, or whether they promote certain values and identities, remains a far less examined question. What do children actually experience when they watch cartoons? This question is not about effects in the behavioral sense. It is about the inner life of the child, the felt quality of engagement with animated characters, narrative worlds, and imaginative situations that cartoons routinely open up.

This is precisely the kind of question that phenomenology is built to address as a philosophical tradition concerned primarily with the structure of

conscious experience. Phenomenology asks not what causes a given response but what it is like to undergo a particular experience from the inside. Max van Manen (9), one of the most influential voices in phenomenological research in human science and education, describes phenomenology as a method that "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences". Applied to children and cartoons, this means asking what cartoon-watching genuinely feels like from a child's point of view, how children perceive and emotionally invest in animated characters, and what meanings they carry away from those encounters into their broader lives.

The problem this study responds to is a noticeable gap in the existing literature as most studies of children and media tend to rely on behavioral observation, content analysis, or experimental design. Valkenburg and Peter (222) have observed that media effects research has long operated within frameworks that treat audiences as largely passive recipients of media influence, with little room for the active, meaning-making engagement that actually characterizes how children relate to media content. This narrow understanding, however useful for certain purposes, leaves the lived and experiential dimension of children's cartoon engagement almost entirely unexplored. What a child feels, imagines, and constructs during and after a cartoon simply does not appear in these frameworks.

This study examines how children perceive animated worlds, how imagination and fantasy operate within those encounters, and how social and cultural forces shape what cartoons ultimately come to mean for children. The aim is not to replace existing approaches but to supplement them with a dimension that only phenomenological inquiry can adequately recover, namely, the first-person, lived character of childhood cartoon experience.

What is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is a philosophical method that takes seriously the question of how things appear to conscious experience. Rather than asking what an object is in some abstract or purely scientific sense, phenomenology asks how that object is encountered, felt, and lived by a conscious subject. This distinction matters for any study concerned with children and cartoons, because it redirects attention from the cartoon as a media product to the cartoon as something a child actually inhabits in experience. The tradition begins with Edmund Husserl, whose concept of intentionality, which is the idea that all consciousness is always directed toward something, forms the philosophical bedrock of the approach. For Husserl (36), "experience is never a blank reception of external stimuli but is always shaped by the particular way consciousness reaches out toward its object". What this means practically is that when a child watches a cartoon, the experience is not a passive intake of images but an active, intentional

engagement in which the child is already bringing expectations, emotions, and interpretive tendencies to what they see.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) extended this framework by insisting that consciousness is not disembodied but is always rooted in a living, sensing body. For him, perception is not something the mind does in isolation from the body. It is something the whole embodied person does. Merleau-Ponty wrote that "the body is our general medium for having a world", and this idea is particularly suggestive when applied to children, whose engagement with animated images is often physical, immediate, and visceral. Dan Zahavi (2003), clarified that what makes phenomenology indispensable is its insistence on the first-person perspective as a legitimate and irreducible domain of inquiry. This is what distinguishes phenomenological inquiry from most existing media research.

Experience

In ordinary usage, experience tends to mean something like a history of exposure to events. In phenomenological terms, however, experience refers to something more intimate and more active. It is not simply what happens to a person but what a person lives through and makes sense of from the inside. This distinction is especially important when studying children, because children tend to inhabit their experiences with a kind of fullness and immediacy that adults have often lost. The child does not merely observe a cartoon; but in a meaningful sense, present within it.

Childhood

Childhood is best understood not as a preparatory phase before real human life begins but as a distinctive mode of being with its own logic, its own perceptual style, and its own relationship to the world. Gareth Matthews (1984) argues against the tendency in both philosophy and developmental psychology to treat childhood as a deficit state, a condition of incompleteness awaiting adult rationality. For Matthews, "children engage in genuine philosophical wondering and possess a quality of openness to experience that deserves serious intellectual attention". William Corsaro (1987) adds a sociological dimension to this, arguing that children are "active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children's cultures while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult society". These perspectives establish childhood as a form of life worth examining on its own terms, rather than as a stage to be explained away by developmental milestones.

Cartoons

Cartoons are animated visual texts that exaggerate, simplify, and reimagine the world through color, movement, and narrative. What makes them phenomenologically interesting is precisely their departure from realism. By stretching physical laws, giving inanimate objects personalities, and resolving moral conflicts within minutes, cartoons construct imaginative worlds that children find more emotionally accessible

than many forms of realistic representation. Paul Wells (10) describes animation as a medium that operates through "the manipulation of movement, form and narrative in ways that exceed the conventions of live-action cinema", and it is this capacity for excess, for impossible things happening with complete emotional conviction, that gives cartoons their distinctive hold on the child's imagination. Cartoons are not simply entertainment but a particular kind of world children can enter, feel, and think inside.

Children's Perception of Cartoons

There is something about animation that speaks directly to the way children already perceive the world. Long before a child is taught to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary, they are already living in a perceptual world that is rich with feeling, movement, and responsiveness. Animated images, with their bright colors, exaggerated expressions, and fast motion, do not feel strange to this world. They feel, in many ways, like a natural extension of it. This points to a genuine structural compatibility between the animated image and the child's mode of perception, one that helps explain why children engage with cartoons with such ease and emotional investment.

Writing on children's emotional responses to media characters, it is noted that young children tend to respond to animated figures with the same emotional registers they apply to real people, attributing intentions, feelings, and moral

qualities to characters based on expressive visual cues rather than narrative context alone (Bosacki and Moore 301). This finding aligns closely with what phenomenology would predict because if perception is always already intentional and emotionally toned, as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both argued, then it follows that a child watching a cartoon does not first see shapes and colors and then infer a character. The character is perceived directly, as a presence with a felt quality, a personality, and a kind of emotional weight.

The way children identify with cartoon characters goes deeper than simple preference. When a child watches a cartoon protagonist face danger or embarrassment, the child does not merely observe from a safe emotional distance. There is a genuine felt participation in the character's situation, something closer to what phenomenologists call empathic projection, where the self imaginatively inhabits another's experience. A scholar has argued that children's engagement with television characters involves active emotional and cognitive work, and that children as young as three are capable of distinguishing between their own emotional states and those of a character while still being genuinely moved by what the character undergoes (Davies 67). This simultaneity, knowing it is not real and yet feeling it fully, is one of the most fascinating phenomenological features of childhood cartoon experience.

Identification is also shaped by resemblance, not just physical resemblance but resemblance of situation

and feeling. A child who feels misunderstood at home may not consciously connect that feeling to a cartoon character who is overlooked by peers, though the emotional resonance of that character's experience can be deeply felt. Sandra Calvert (130) notes that children form strong parasocial relationships with media characters, relationships that carry genuine psychological and emotional significance even in the absence of real interaction. What this suggests, phenomenologically, is that the cartoon character becomes a kind of experiential companion through whom the child explores emotional possibilities that their own immediate life may not yet have offered them.

Adults who enter a fictional world must usually make a deliberate cognitive effort to set aside what they know to be real. For children, this suspension of disbelief is far less effortful and far more complete. It is less a choice than a natural disposition, a feature of what van Manen calls the child's particular "lifeworld," the pre-reflective background of assumptions, habits, and orientations through which all experience is structured (van Manen 11). Children do not decide to believe in a cartoon world but simply find themselves in it, absorbed and present in a way that most adults can only partially recover.

This quality of absorption has important implications meaning that what children encounter in cartoons is not held at arm's length as fiction but is, during the encounter itself, lived with something approaching the seriousness of reality. Research on children's emotional

responses to media found that children's fear responses to animated content are physiologically and psychologically real, producing stress responses that persist well beyond the viewing experience itself (Cantor 292). The cartoon world, in other words, is not a lesser world for the child. It is, during the time of engagement, a fully inhabited one, and what happens in it carries genuine experiential weight.

Imagination, Fantasy, and Meaning-Making in Cartoons

If perception is the entry point into the cartoon world, imagination is what keeps the child there. The moment a child sits before an animated screen, something more than visual processing begins to happen. The child starts filling in gaps, anticipating what a character might do next, feeling the pull of a narrative whose resolution is not yet known, and investing emotionally in outcomes that, strictly speaking, do not exist. This imaginative activity is not secondary to the cartoon experience; but constitutive of it. Without it, cartoons would be nothing more than moving images.

For Sartre, the imagining consciousness does not simply reproduce a weakened version of perception. It takes a fundamentally different orientation toward its object, one in which the object is posited as absent, as beyond the immediate perceptual field, and yet held present through an act of consciousness (Sartre 16). When a child imagines alongside a cartoon narrative, following a character into danger or hoping for a happy resolution, they are performing

exactly this kind of act, holding something emotionally real while knowing, at some level, that it is not perceptually there. This is a sophisticated cognitive and emotional achievement, and the fact that children do it so naturally and so early in life says something important about the imaginative richness of childhood.

Cartoon narratives are particularly well suited to this kind of imaginative engagement because they operate through fantasy, that is, through deliberate departures from the constraints of ordinary reality. Kieran Egan (27) argues that fantasy is not a retreat from understanding but is one of the primary cognitive tools through which children make sense of abstract concepts, emotional realities, and moral questions. A cartoon in which a small, weak character repeatedly outsmarts a large, powerful one is not simply entertaining but giving the child imaginative access to ideas about power, fairness, and resilience in a form that is emotionally graspable.

Meaning-making, in this context, is not a passive reception of intended messages as children do not simply absorb what a cartoon's creators want them to learn. They bring their own experiences, fears, desires, and social knowledge to the viewing encounter and construct meanings that are often personal and idiosyncratic. David Buckingham (6), insists that children are "active and critical users of media, capable of making their own meanings and pleasures". This active dimension of

cartoon engagement is frequently underestimated by adults who assume that children simply receive what is on screen.

What phenomenology adds to Buckingham's point is a deeper account of how this meaning-making actually feels from the inside. It is lived through emotion, through bodily response, through the imaginative co-authorship of narrative. Judy DeLoache and Gabrielle Gottlieb (3), examining the ways young children engage with symbolic and narrative media, found that children do not simply receive the surface content of what they watch but actively interpret character motivations and story situations through the emotional and experiential knowledge they already carry with them. The child is a participant, and the meaning that emerges from cartoon experience is always, in part, a creation of the child's own imaginative and emotional life.

Social and Cultural Influences in Children's Cartoon Experiences

The child who watches a cartoon is never simply an isolated consciousness encountering an animated world. That child carries into the viewing experience an entire social and cultural history bordering on a set of values, relationships, expectations, and learned ways of seeing that have been shaped by family, community, language, and broader cultural environment. This is one of the points where phenomenology must be pushed beyond its more individualistic tendencies, because experience, however

personal is always social. The child does not arrive at a cartoon as a blank slate but as a social being, and the experience they have is filtered through that social formation in ways that are often invisible to the child themselves.

A scholar argues that human experience is always structured by what he called the "lifeworld," which is a pre-given social and cultural horizon that determines in advance what can be perceived, valued, and understood (Schutz 72). For children, this lifeworld is largely constructed by the family and immediate community, and it operates quietly beneath the surface of every media encounter. A child raised in a community that values collective identity and communal responsibility will not experience a cartoon that celebrates individual heroism in the same way as a child raised in a more individualistic cultural setting. The images on screen may be identical, but the experiences they generate are shaped by entirely different social foundations.

Gender is one of the most visible ways in which this social shaping operates. This is because cartoons have historically encoded strong gender norms, assigning distinct personality traits, roles, and narrative functions to male and female characters, and children pick up on these encodings with remarkable sensitivity. Rebecca Hains (43), while examining the cultural politics of girl-targeted animated programming, found that even cartoons ostensibly designed to empower girls frequently reinforce conventional femininity through

character design, narrative resolution, and the values that female protagonists are shown to embody. What matters phenomenologically is not just that these representations exist but that children live through them, absorbing gender expectations not as abstract ideological messages but as felt qualities of characters they admire, imitate, and identify with.

The context in which a child watches a cartoon, whether alone, alongside siblings, or in the company of parents who comment, explain, or express disapproval, significantly alters the nature of the experience itself. Amy Nathanson's (123) shows that active parental commentary during viewing, whether critical or instructive, changes how children process and evaluate media content, sometimes deepening engagement and sometimes creating emotional distance from characters and narratives that the child might otherwise have embraced unreservedly. Experience, in this sense, is not only what happens between the child and the screen but what also happens in the social space around that encounter.

Cultural representation, or its absence, shapes cartoon experience in ways that are precisely consequential for children from minority or non-Western backgrounds. When a child consistently encounters cartoon worlds populated by characters who do not look like them, speak like them, or live in worlds that resemble their own, the effect is not neutral. Srividya Ramasubramanian (341) argues that the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minority groups in

children's media contributes to what she calls "media-based stereotype threat," a condition in which repeated exposure to distorted or absent representations quietly erodes a child's sense of belonging and self-worth. Lived from the inside, this is not an abstract sociological problem but an experience of estrangement and a feeling that the imaginative worlds one is invited to inhabit were not really built with you in mind.

What all of this points to is that cartoon experience is never purely private but mediated by the social and cultural world the child inhabits, and a genuinely phenomenological account of that experience must be willing to trace those variations carefully. To this end, the meanings children make from cartoons and the characters they love and fear and emulate couple with the emotional textures of their animated encounters, are shaped not only by what is on screen but by who the child has been made to be by the world around them.

Evaluation

Having examined the phenomenological structure of children's cartoon experience across perception, imagination, meaning-making, and social and cultural mediation, it becomes necessary to assess how well this framework actually holds up. The phenomenological approach brings genuine strengths to the study of children and cartoons, but also carries limitations that an honest evaluation cannot afford to ignore.

The most significant strength of phenomenology as applied here is precisely what makes it different from most existing research and it is the insistence on taking the child's inner life seriously as a subject of inquiry in its own right.

Behavioral and cognitive frameworks have produced important findings about how children respond to animated media, but they tend to study the child from the outside, measuring observable outcomes rather than attending to the experience itself. Thomas Schwandt has noted that interpretive and phenomenological approaches to research are valuable precisely because they "seek to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt 193). In a field dominated by effect-oriented research, this orientation is not merely refreshing. It is necessary, because the dimensions of experience that phenomenology illuminates simply cannot be reached by other means.

A second strength lies in the framework's capacity to hold together dimensions of cartoon experience that other approaches tend to separate. Perception, imagination, emotion, cultural identity, and social context are not treated here as distinct variables to be isolated and measured. They are understood as aspects of a single, unified experience that only makes sense when considered together. This integrative quality gives phenomenological analysis a certain richness and authenticity that more

fragmented methodological approaches tend to lack.

That said, the phenomenological examination of childhood experience faces a methodological challenge that must be acknowledged directly. Children, particularly young children, do not always possess the language or the reflective capacity to articulate what they experience. The gap between what a child lives through and what a child can report is real, and it means that any phenomenological account of childhood experience carries an irreducible element of interpretive reconstruction.

William Corsaro, reflecting on the methodological difficulties inherent in studying children's social and experiential worlds, notes that adult researchers inevitably bring their own interpretive frameworks to the study of childhood, and that even careful ethnographic and qualitative methods carry the risk of mapping adult conceptual categories onto experiences that children themselves organise quite differently (Corsaro 31). This is a legitimate concern, and it places an obligation on researchers to remain epistemically humble and treat their accounts as approximations rather than definitive transcriptions of the child's inner world.

Phenomenological inquiry, by its very nature, attends to the particular and the situated. The experiences examined in this paper are not uniform across all children. They are shaped by gender, culture, family context, and representational politics, and what counts as a typical cartoon experience for one

child may be quite foreign to another. Kieran Egan and Gillian Judson argues that any educational or philosophical account of childhood that fails to account for cultural and individual variation risks producing a portrait of the child that is, in effect, a portrait of a particular kind of child, usually the Western, middle-class child who has historically dominated the research literature (Egan and Judson 54). This study has attempted to resist that tendency, particularly in its treatment of cultural representation, but the limitation remains one that future phenomenological research in this area must address more systematically.

Despite these limitations, the phenomenological framework remains the most adequate available approach for the question this study set out to answer. No other method is as well positioned to recover the lived, felt, and meaning-laden character of children's cartoon experience.

Conclusion

This study argues that children's experience of cartoons is a genuinely phenomenological event, one that deserves to be examined not through the lens of behavioral effects or cognitive outcomes alone but through careful attention to what that experience is actually like from the inside. Beginning with the child's perceptual engagement with animated images, moving through the imaginative and meaning-making processes that cartoon narratives activate, and then situating all of this within the social and cultural worlds that children inhabit, the study has tried to build a

A Phenomenological Examination of Children's Experience of Cartoons

picture of cartoon experience that is as honest as the available frameworks allow.

What emerges from this examination is a portrait of the child as an active, emotionally invested, and culturally situated participant in the cartoon world, not a passive receiver of media content but someone who brings imagination, feeling, and personal history to every viewing encounter. This is not a minor correction to existing research but a fundamental reorientation, one that places the child's subjectivity at the center of inquiry rather than at its margins.

Dafna Lemish, corroborate that children across different social and cultural settings consistently demonstrate an active orientation toward media, constructing meanings that are "anchored in their own life experiences, social relationships, and cultural contexts" (Lemish 47). This study treats the child not as an object of media influence but as a subject of media experience. The implications of this reorientation extend beyond the academic with parents, educators, media producers, and policymakers who take children's cartoon experience seriously. They will ask not only what cartoons teach but what children feel, imagine, and become through their engagement with animated worlds. They will recognize that the hours a child spends with a cartoon are not empty hours but hours in which identity is being quietly shaped, emotional possibilities are being explored, and a relationship with the broader cultural world is being formed.

There remains, of course, much that this paper has not been able to do. A fully adequate phenomenological account of children's cartoon experience would need to draw on empirical engagement with children themselves, through interviews, observations, and narrative methods that allow children's own voices to enter the analysis just as it has been shown that young children are far more capable of articulating the textures of their experience than adult-centered research traditions have typically assumed (Clark and Moss 6).

What this study has established, at the very least, is that the question of what children experience when they watch cartoons is a serious philosophical question, one that opens onto deeper questions about consciousness, imagination, identity, and the relationship between culture and inner life. Cartoons have always been part of childhood, hence, it is time they became a more serious part of how childhood is studied from a philosophical and phenomenological point of view for a fuller understanding of the intersection and interconnection.

Works Cited

- Bosacki, Sandra Leanne, and Carolyn Moore. "Preschoolers' Understanding of Simple and Complex Emotions: Links with Gender and Language." *Sex Roles* 63.5 2010 289-308.
- Buckingham, David. *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of*

A Phenomenological Examination of Children's Experience of Cartoons

- Electronic Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- Calvert, Sandra L. "Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing." *The Future of Children* 18.1 (2008): 205-234.
- Cantor, Joanne. "Media and Children's Fears, Anxieties, and Perceptions of Danger." *Handbook of Children and the Media*. Ed. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001. 287-303.
- Clark, Alison, and Peter Moss. *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. 3rd ed. London: National Children's Bureau, 2011.
- Corsaro, William A. *The Sociology of Childhood*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2015.
- Davies, Máire Messenger. *Children, Media and Culture*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010.
- DeLoache, Judy S., and Gabrielle Gottlieb, eds. *The Infant Mind: Origins of the Social Brain*. New York: Guilford Press, 2000.
- Egan, Kieran. *Teaching as Storytelling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Egan, Kieran, and Gillian Judson. *Imagination and the Engaged Learner: Cognitive Tools for the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2016.
- Hains, Rebecca C. *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls Through the Princess-Obsessed Years*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2014.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931.
- Lemish, Dafna. *Children and Television: A Global Perspective*. Malden: Blackwell, 2007.
- Matthews, Gareth B. *The Philosophy of Childhood*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald Landes. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Nathanson, Amy I. "The Unintended Effects of Parental Mediation of Television on Adolescents." *Media Psychology* 4.3 (2002): 207-230.
- Ramasubramanian, Srividya. "Media-Based Strategies to Reduce Racial Stereotypes Activated by News Stories." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 84.2 (2007): 249-264.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*. Trans. Jonathan Webber. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Schutz, Alfred. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1967.

A Phenomenological Examination of Children's Experience of Cartoons

- Schwandt, Thomas A. *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007.
- Valkenburg, Patti M., and Jochen Peter. "The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model." *Journal of Communication* 63.2 (2013): 221-243.
- Van Manen, Max. *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014.
- Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Zahavi, Dan. *Phenomenology: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2019.