

Are Animation Movies Meant Only for Children? A Look at the Evolving Audience

SHAZEEN THALHA A.^{1*} and CHANDANA JAYAWARDANA B.²

¹Animation & VFX, Falmouth University/ AMDT School of Creativity, Colombo, Sri Lanka
m.shazeenthalha@gmail.com

²AMDT School of Creativity, Colombo, Sri Lanka
chandanaj1968@gmail.com

Abstract – For over a century, animated movies have captured global audiences through imaginative storytelling and visual innovation. Despite this, a long-standing misconception persists that animation is a genre exclusively for children. This study explores how audience perceptions of animation have evolved, investigating why adults also engage with animated films. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative data from a structured survey of 47 participants aged between 6 and 40 with qualitative insights from interviews with two industry professionals: Canadian animator Alex Nagy and Sri Lankan filmmaker King Ratnam. The collected data were thematically analyzed to identify key factors influencing audience engagement, including nostalgia, storytelling quality, and emotional resonance. Findings reveal that while children remain a major target audience, young adults form a substantial portion of viewers who associate animation with creativity, comfort, and reflection. The study concludes that animation functions as a universal storytelling medium rather than a child-exclusive genre. This research contributes to contemporary discussions on audience psychology, cultural consumption, and the role of animation in global media, suggesting opportunities for future industry diversification and adult-oriented storytelling.

Keywords: Animation movies; Kidult culture; Animation industry; Storytelling

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I. Introduction

The global film industry has evolved for over a century, continually reshaping how audiences consume stories. From the first recorded motion picture, *The Roundhay Garden Scene* (1888), to contemporary digital productions, cinema has reflected technological innovation and shifting audience mindsets (hooks, 2020). Nowadays, people tend to watch not just English-language movies created by famous directors that earn millions and rank as blockbusters. Audiences are interested in watching good stories, even if they are not in their mother tongue. It is evident in Korean dramas, also referred to as K-dramas, which have gained popularity worldwide (jothi, 2024). They foster diverse narratives that connect audiences beyond language barriers through the power of storytelling. With the help of streaming platforms, narratives from around the world are at our fingertips. It's not just big-budget movies that are popular, even short web series have gained a significant following. The audience mindset is changing once again in the current age, with a growing preference for web series over movies. The whole concept of allowing audiences to escape their daily lives and immerse themselves in different worlds of experience has drastically changed, evolving from watching movies acted by fellow humans to experiencing fictional worlds and computer-generated characters.

A. *Cartoon and the Kids*

Adults now have a variety of options for choosing their entertainment, including genres, language, ratings, plot, and more, while children have been watching cartoons since their inception. In past eras, children spent their leisure time playing various outdoor games with their friends daily. Nowadays, they prefer to sit and watch their favorite cartoons on television. Cartoons and the corporations that produce them are hugely successful as they capture their primary target audience of children since these have become an essential part of their daily lives. Children are exposed to animated cartoons from an early age, becoming regular viewers. Children were drawn into fictional, colorful worlds they could escape into. Girls fantasized about being beautiful princesses, and boys imagined themselves as mighty superheroes who protected the earth.

B. *Success of Cartoons Among Kids*

Corporations that produce animated movies and cartoons earn billions in the present era through various channels (chatterjee, 2023). The major studios in this industry have perfected their workflows to ensure these productions are successful among their target audiences. According to Gitnux (2024), "Films produced by major studios like Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks have a success rate of over 70%."

Below are the major factors that contribute to the success of animated movies among audiences:

1. *Gripping Storyline*

Corporate companies often use the Hero's Journey structure in their stories. This storytelling technique involves the main character going on a journey, facing challenges with help from others,

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solving problems, and returning home with new knowledge or a reward (kaur, 2017). Many major animated movies, such as "The Lion King," "Frozen," and "Kung Fu Panda," use this method to create their screenplays.

2. Character Development

Creating characters that resonate with the audience is crucial for making a relatable movie. Animation movies often include relatable traits in their fictional characters. For example, "Toy Story," released in 1995, was the first computer-generated animation movie. The main character, Woody the Sheriff, is owned by a teenager named Andy. As the audience watched the "Toy Story" sequels, they saw Andy playing with his toys and eventually giving them away in "Toy Story 3." This captured the special connection kids have with their toys and made the franchise a huge success.

3. Musical Score

According to Gitnux (2024), musicals make up about 30% of successful animated movies. A catchy and memorable soundtrack greatly contributes to their success. Many animated movies are remembered for their songs, like "Frozen's" "Let It Go." Released in 2013, the song became a hit, reaching the top five on the Billboard Hot 100, selling 10.9 million copies in a year, and winning the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Disney also created musical shows based on "Frozen" to let audiences enjoy the "Let It Go" soundtrack again.

4. Cute Pets

Reflect on the last time you watched an animated feature that didn't include a pet animal. These kinds of characters are essential in animated features, significantly contributing to the film's success. A prime example is Donkey from "Shrek." This character is designed to be a sidekick for the main character and supports the main character's quest.

5. Humor

A universal language and a key tool for keeping audiences engaged over the years. A good balance of humor makes a movie enjoyable and memorable for all ages. Humor isn't just about dialogue in a specific language; some animated movies use gibberish to appeal to a wide audience. For example, in the "Minions" movies, Pierre Coffin, the main voice for the Minion language, used phrases like "Paneer Tikka Masala" from an Indian restaurant menu in "Despicable Me 2."

B. Impact of Marketing on the Success of Animated Movies Among Children

An external factor contributing to the success of the animation movie industry is the marketing aspect. The industry promotes itself through various methods to retain its audience. Below mentioned is the main external factor that contribute to the success of the animation movie industry among children:

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1. Merchandising

From the days of Mickey Mouse to the present with Inside Out, promoting movies through merchandising has been a prominent method of reaching the intended target audience. Merchandising not only generates additional revenue but also increases awareness of the movie. The film merchandise market is where studios can achieve their highest profits. Long after a movie has left theaters, its imagery can resonate consumer culture, targeting a broad demographic from children to adults in countless ways. Popular movies continue to be marketed beyond the cinema experience. Presently, merchandising is categorized into many types targeting their niche audiences, including entertainment, products and services aimed at children, sportswear and accessories, gifts and decorations, and apparel and fashion.

C. Impact of Animated Movies on Children's Behavior and Development

1. Positive Effects

Cartoons have several positive effects on children: they enhance learning through engaging visuals, support natural language acquisition by exposing kids to new languages, boost creativity through imaginative stories and characters, and provide humor that helps relieve stress and promote enjoyment.

2. Negative Effects

Cartoons can also have negative effects on children: they may promote violence by encouraging imitation of heroic fights, expose kids to inappropriate language, present poor role models that influence negative behavior, and lead to addiction through excessive screen time and dependency on animated content.

II. Literature Review

Presently the ideology of animation movies being exclusive for kids dates to the early days of their school life. Kümmerling-Meibauer, B. (2013). *New Perspectives in Children's Film Studies*, says in certain countries, children's films are incorporated into the standard school curriculum, highlighting the importance of these films as a significant aspect of children's culture that deserves educational focus. Growing up, cartoons heavily influence every stage of a child's life. In many schools in the Sri Lankan region, cartoons are shown to kids as part of their curriculum. On Children's Day, schools around Colombo often suspend regular classes. Instead, they show animated movies to primary class students. These movies are chosen because they typically offer valuable lessons and educational content suitable for young learners. This indicates that watching cartoons is a mandatory experience for every child, even in structured environments like schools.

Even though these animated movies are created with the utmost care to cater to their target audience of children, they often include serious conversations. M Keith Booker (2010) in *Disney, Pixar, and the hidden messages of children's film* says *Chicken Run* Serves as an extended

*Contact: Phone +94-767216786

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metaphor comparing chicken farms to Nazi prison camps, which might seem like an unpromising premise, but it actually works quite well as a film.

“Chicken Run” is a famous stop-motion animated movie that stands tall even after two decades. The movie’s summary is that a few chickens trapped on a farm try to escape. The story is told with dark humor, but it has a deeper meaning, connecting to Nazi prison camps. Although animated movies are often seen as exclusively for children, the industry still produces content on topics that children might not fully comprehend. The purpose of including these kinds of topics is to attract audiences beyond their target demographic.

Making animated movies that are not exclusively for children is a common practice in the present time. As humans evolve, filmmakers have used animation as a tool to communicate complex stories in the most beautiful manner. Belleau, F. (2021). Pixar’s ‘Soul’ presents a unique look at the meaning of life says “Soul,” while still a family movie, is certainly geared towards aging adults reflecting on their purpose in life. Because of this, I look forward to watching it again later in life when I can relate more deeply to Joe’s experiences. Even though Pixar’s target audience is children, Pixar still tells stories that are too complex for children to fully understand. This is why other age groups become constant viewers of Pixar’s animated movies. Pixar’s 2020 film Soul revolves around the theme of aging adults trying to find their purpose in the world. The actual target audience for that movie was middle-aged adults.

It is also evident that when animation movie-making companies don’t include factors that contribute to a movie’s success, it affects the overall quality and impact of the film. M Keith Booker (2010) in Disney, Pixar, and the hidden messages of children’s film says the basic concept of “Ratatouille” might not seem promising for a children’s film. It tells the story of a French rat who travels to Paris and becomes a top chef in the city of haute cuisine. Besides the unappealing idea of a rat in a kitchen, the film also faces the challenge that young viewers might not be interested in fine cooking. Additionally, the movie lacks catchy music and big-name voice actors. Pixar’s 2007 film “Ratatouille” features one of the most interesting stories Pixar has ever produced. However, the movie is not particularly well-known for having a famous musical score or celebrity voice actors. “Ratatouille” serves as an example of a movie that lacks one of the most important selling factors of animated films: a catchy musical score.

Even though M. Keith Booker said the movie “Ratatouille” is not intended for kids, it still became popular among audiences because the main character is a pet for a human in the movie. Richard Coyne (2012). Why Cartoons have animals, says that humans are a pet-loving species, having co-evolved with animals that have adapted to live alongside human populations. This might be the reason why all the animation movies we see have a pet in the story, which contributes to attract the audience towards the movie

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III. Objective of Study

The objective of the study is to investigate two main points: what makes cartoons and animated movies exclusively appealing to children and why they are so successful, and what other audiences are engaging with these animated movies.

IV. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques to explore audience perceptions of animated movies across age groups. The design was chosen to provide both statistical insights and contextual depth, enabling the integration of numerical data from surveys with interpretive understanding from interviews. The study faced notable constraints. Primarily due to accessibility and ethical limitations in surveying children. As such, the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive, offering preliminary insights into audience perceptions that warrant further large-scale research.

1. Quantitative Method - Online Survey

An online survey was distributed via Google Forms to collect responses from individuals aged between 6 and 40 years. The final sample size included 47 participants, drawn from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, including students from Queensway Girls International School. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were anonymized. The survey consisted of 10 questions, a mix of closed-ended and optional open-ended items. These questions focused on viewing habits, emotional connections, favorite films, and opinions on whether animation is meant exclusively for children. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, using percentage distributions to identify patterns across age and gender groups.

2. Qualitative Method - Expert Interviews

Two industry professionals were interviewed to provide expert perspectives and validate audience findings:

- Alex Nagy, a Canadian animator with 17 years of experience in the animation movie industry.
- King Ratnam, a Sri Lankan live-action filmmaker and media educator.

Both interviews were conducted online and followed a semi-structured format. Each expert was asked about their views on target audiences, storytelling complexity, and the evolution of animation as a communication medium. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

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V. Findings and Data Presentation

Table 1

Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
6 - 12	7	14.9%
13 - 19	12	25.5%
20 - 29	28	59.6%
30+		8.5%
Total	47	100%

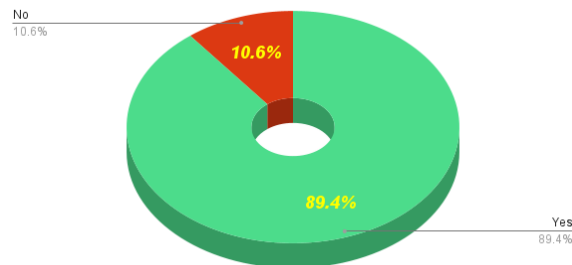
Table 2

Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
Male	24	51%
Female	23	49%
Total	47	100%

Figure 1

Respondents Watching Animation Movies



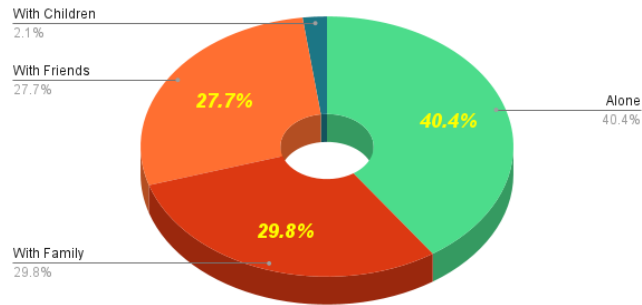
The above image shows the survey results for the question, “Do you enjoy animated movies?” Most participants (89.4%) said they do. This question was asked to ensure honest answers for the rest of the survey questions. The responses from the small group who don’t enjoy animated movies might offer useful insights into different perspectives. An open-ended follow-up question asked, “If yes, please explain why.” Out of 47 respondents, 34 answered this optional question. Their reasons for enjoying animated movies were grouped into themes: Creativity and Imagination, Visual Appeal and Artistry, Storytelling and Themes, Nostalgia and Emotional Connection, Humor and Entertainment, Characters and Excitement, Relaxation and Comfort, and Unique Experience.

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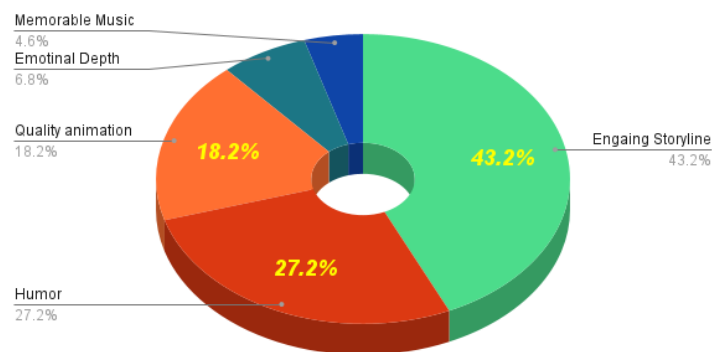
Figure 2
Viewing Companions for Animated Movies



Above image represents the viewing companions for animated movies. 40.4% of respondents watch animated movies alone. This indicates that watching animated movies is a strong personal choice in their lifestyle. It could also mean that these audiences are constant viewers of animation content, facilitated by streaming platforms at our fingertips.

29.8% watch animated movies with family. Most animated movies are family-friendly, and this data proves that families do occasionally gather to watch these movies. Another 27.7% watch with friends, which could represent the group that goes to theaters to watch animated movies. This suggests that animated movies are popular in social settings. Notably, 2.1% of respondents watch animated movies with children. This could represent parents who watch animated movies because their children enjoy watching them with a parent.

Figure 3
Elements That Make an Animated Movie Good



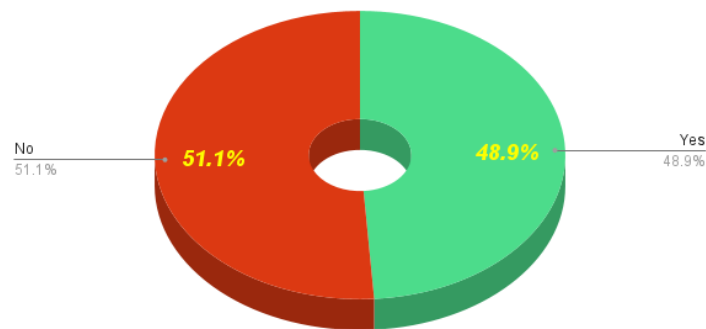
Above chart shows what interests the audience most in an animated movie. A majority, 43.2%, believe an engaging storyline is the most important element. These respondents were aged 13 to 30, indicating that they prefer narratives that resonate with them.

Next, 27.2% value humor, with respondents mainly aged 6-12, 20-29, and 30+. This suggests that both kids and adults enjoy lighthearted content, while teenagers look for more in animated movies.

High-quality animation is important to 18.2% of respondents, highlighting the visual appeal's role in entertainment. Additionally, 6.8% prioritize emotional depth in animated movies. This may be because audiences often miss the intended messages.

Lastly, 4.6% emphasize the importance of memorable music. A notable difference is that the majority of those who picked high-quality animation are male, while the respondents who picked music are predominantly female. This difference shows the varying interests of both genders, reflecting stereotypical preferences in consuming animated movies.

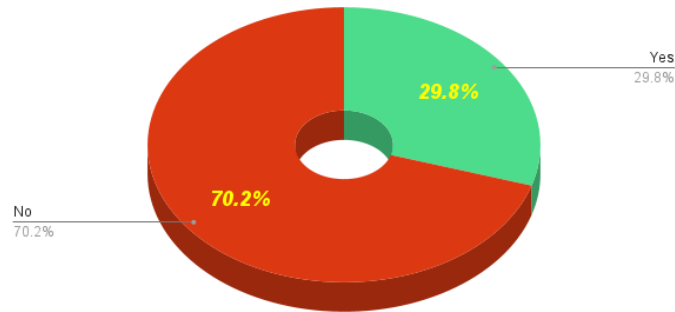
Figure 4
Exposure to Animated Movies in School Settings



The above chart represents the responses to the question, "Has your schools shown animated movies in any occasions?" Schools, as external parties, often uphold the belief that these movies are primarily for children. To test whether this notion is true, the above question was asked. Notably, 48.9% of respondents agreed that they have seen animated movies in their school. A follow-up question was asked: if yes, what movies were shown? The responses indicated that the movies were typically Pixar or Disney productions that fall under the category of films with underlying life lesson meanings. Examples include Toy Story, Rapunzel, Frozen, and Cars.

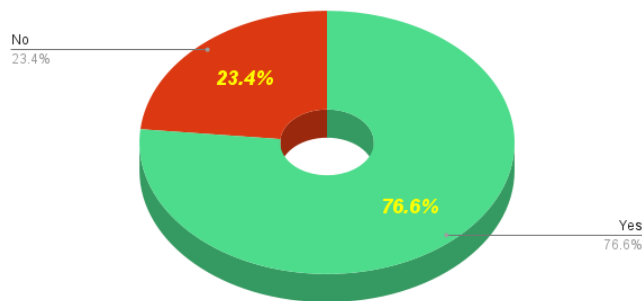
Apart from the age span of 30, the rest of the respondents agreed with this question. This indicates that showing animated movies in schools is a new practice in Sri Lanka that has a lasting impact and will likely continue in the future.

Figure 5
Consumer Purchase of Animated Movie Merchandise



The above chart represents the influence of merchandising on animated movies. This question aimed to find out whether adults who once kids were are the primary consumers of these merchandise items. 29.8% of respondents agreed that they purchase animated movie merchandise, with the majority being adults aged 20 to 29. What's more interesting is the follow-up question: "If yes, please explain why." One respondent said it makes them feel more connected to the movie or character and triggers memories. This response indicates that animated movies are made for children, but adults also embrace their inner child, consuming these movies and staying connected to them throughout adulthood.

Figure 6
Support for Increased Production of Adult-Oriented Animated Movies



The finding that 76.6% of respondents wish to see more adult-oriented animated films supports recent discussions in animation scholarship about shifting audience expectations. As noted by Civita (2020) and Best Animation Studios (2023), the boundaries between child and adult audiences have blurred, creating space for narratives that explore universal human emotions through animated form. Adults are not simply revisiting childhood favorites, but are engaging with the medium for its emotional richness

1. Insights with Industry Experts

To support this research, I interviewed two movie industry professionals. Alex Nagy, a Canadian animator with 17 years of experience, shared his views on whether animated movies are just for kids. He said the industry mainly targets children, especially those aged 13 to 14 and younger. Animated films often include adult jokes for parents while keeping the visuals appealing to kids. Alex noted that people over 35 without children are unlikely to watch these movies in theaters, and interest decreases as people age.

King Ratnam, a Sri Lankan filmmaker, also agrees that animated movies are mainly for children but believes they can tackle deeper, philosophical topics. He enjoyed cartoons like Popeye and Tom and Jerry as a child and later recognized their hidden meanings, such as political themes. He thinks that while these cartoons attract kids, they also have adult content that makes them engage for adults.

The two professional interviews provided contrasting yet complementary insights into how animation appeals to diverse audiences. Alex Nagy emphasized the market-driven nature of the industry, explaining that studios primarily target children but intentionally include elements—such as humor and emotional depth—that engage parents and young adults. In contrast, King Ratnam highlighted the cultural and philosophical depth within animated works, suggesting that even seemingly simple cartoons often contain metaphorical meanings that resonate with mature audiences.

Together, their perspectives illustrate how commercial strategy and artistic intent coexist within animation, enabling it to function as a multi-layered medium that connects with both children and adults.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the notion that animated movies are exclusive for children is true to some extent. The creators who produce this content genuinely put their heart and soul into crafting these stories for the intended audience children. They successfully capture the attention and imagination of their target audience. However, this does not prevent other audiences from enjoying animated movies as well. Children who grew up watching cartoons are now young adults who still love to watch animated cartoons produced today. Society would refer to these kinds of people as 'kidults.' A kidult is an adult who enjoys activities typically meant for children. But when viewed as an art form, the animation industry itself is continually evolving and becoming a better version of itself over time. It aims to capture a wide audience, transcending demographics.

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In 2023, at the BAFTA (British Academy Film Awards), Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro won the award for Best Animated Film for his stop-motion rendition of Pinocchio. Guillermo mentioned, "Animation is cinema. Animation is not just a genre for kids."

Walt Disney, the founder of the Walt Disney Company, emphasized the importance of embracing a childlike approach to life. As Disney said, "Who says we have to grow up?" This highlights the value of allowing children to grow into adulthood while still maintaining their inner child.

Presently, the world is filled with enjoyable entertainment content, and the animation industry consistently produces life lessons that resonate with many audiences, leaving long-lasting impacts on their lives. From the early days of hearing stories and watching cartoons to the evolution into animated movies, this content has been a significant part of human life across generations. Surpassing borders and age gaps, animated movies have become a universal medium that everyone can enjoy. This trend will hopefully continue in the future, sustaining its audience in even better ways.

The findings have particular significance for emerging animation markets such as Sri Lanka, where animation is still largely perceived as a medium for children. Recognizing that adults actively engage with animated content opens opportunities for local studios and filmmakers to experiment with more mature narratives, genre diversity, and culturally relevant themes. For Sri Lankan media consumers, this study highlights a cultural shift one that encourages greater appreciation of animation as a serious art form capable of conveying national identity, social issues, and creative innovation.

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