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# **“I CAN’T STAND THOSE POKEMONS...THEY DRIVE MY CHILDREN CRAZY”. INFANTS, PARENTS AND PRESCHOOL TEACHERS TALK ABOUT POKEMONS**

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## **Abstract**

Pikatsou, Raitsou, Voulpux and Ash are the new virtual idols of young children – the heirs of Mickey and Donald – the latest achievement of hero and idol industry, the new consuming product, which is targeted at the largest but weakest group of consumers, the children. Nowadays, comics or cartoon heroes seem to comprise a new domineering force over children's thoughts, dreams, language and life. As a result, Pokemons have been depicted as one of the latest and most common discussion topics among parents, educators, children and advertisers. The purpose of this piece of research was to elucidate a part of this discussion. Thus, we asked from 7 preschool teachers, 12 infants and 5 parents to talk about Pokemons, using semi-structured interview as a research tool. In addition, we observed children's behavior during their play in 4 preschool classes. The analysis of the observation data showed that when playing, children imitate accurately the acts and the speech of Pokemons characters. They become violent and they repeat cliché phrases, which are used very often in the Pokemons TV programme. The interview analysis showed that children have an almost pathologic admiration for Pokemons, “trainers” and their action. Teachers and parents report violent behaviors and accurate imitations as results of children's obsession with Pokemons.

**Key words:** consuming product, preschool education, idol industry, behaviors, cartoon heroes

## **INTRODUCTION**

When Ellen Key entitled the 20<sup>th</sup> century "the century of child" in one of her most popular books, she could not imagine that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Neil

Postman would entitle one of his own most known books as "The Disappearance of Childhood" (1982). In this book Postman discusses the role played by the electronic mass media in the disappearance of childhood or childishness. Although his views referred only to the USA of the early eighties, today they concern the rapidly extended global "society of information". Postman's ideas became gradually very popular, because they obviously expressed a widespread worry regarding the effects of "visual revolution" on children's soul. The fundamental question posed by Postman was whether the modern "technopolium" – the submission of all types of civilization to technology – is the appropriate environment for the preservation and the development of childhood.

Even though some may believe that Postman's ideas are mere exaggerations, no one would deny that a considerable change of the childhood took place at the turning point of the millennium. A child in the USA spends about 40 hours per week watching television or playing video games (Popper & Condry, 1994: 46). Condry (1994) notes that children who watch a lot of television "read less, play less and are generally more corpulent than other children" (Condry, 1994). It is not surprising that children who watch 25 violent actions per hour in cartoons are more aggressive than children who watch less television. Postman (1996: 33) writes: "*An average American child between 3 and 18 years old watches about 500.000 advertisements, in other words TV advertisements seem to be the only substantial source of values, to which children and young people are exposed*".

The literature concerning the television habits of children in the USA indicates that (Policy Statement, 1995; Wright et al. 1997):

- 43% of the families cannot report a single TV program that they encourage their children to watch
- The average daily period of time that American children spend in front of a television or a computer is 4.5 hours
- 90% of TV programs are not appropriate for children
- 26% of children and their parents have TV sets in their bedrooms
- Children watch television about 2-3 hours daily
- Although some parents believe that watching TV gets somebody off to sleep easily, the research shows that 2/3 of children have sleeping problems and 1/3 of these problems are caused by TV.

The table below presents data regarding American TV and TV watching (Nielsen, 1993; Palmer, 1988; Comstock, 1991).

**Table 1:** *Statistical data about American TV and TV watching*

Number of TV advertisements that a child watches annually	20,000
Number of minutes that parents and children discuss essential issues daily	38.5
Number of minutes that children watch TV weekly	1,680

Percentage of 6-17 years'old children who have a TV in their bedroom	50%
Number of hours that a typical child spends on school annually	900
Number of hours that a typical child watches TV annually	1,500
Percentage of families that watch TV during mealtime	66%
Number of videotapes that are rented annually	6,000,000
Number of books that are borrowed or read in libraries	3,000,000
Hours that TV is open daily	7
Number of scientific researches concerning TV	4,000
Number of scientific researches about TV violence	1,200

**Television and children**

Television emerged as a new medium of entertainment and communication. However, nowadays, TV is a fundamental source of knowledge, information and learning, especially for nuclear and one-parent families. In Plato's and Aristotle's work the image as a philosophic category was related to the theory of knowledge, because the sight was considered to lead the soul to self-cognition (see for example Plato's *Faedros* or Aristotle's *After Physics, about Sense*). The Pre-Socratics pointed out the importance of the cognitive meaning and the subjectivism of the image as a perceptive feeling, because "the facet of certain things/issues is engraved as images on the morale (Eleni's Encomium 17, DK II 293.20-1).

The "TV-fairytale" has replaced the narrations of grandparents and it has been established as an important element of the family environment, a constant frame of reference for the infants in certain interactive social and psychological processes, a new kind of observational learning. Through observation learning, children acquire behaviors or alter the already existing ones, develop attitudes, viewpoints and social values (Bandura, 1969). According to Liebert (1973), the learning process consists of three stages: a. exposure, b. acquisition and c. acceptance. The animated picture is also structured in a triple articulation, the pictorial figures displayed, their signs and the signals which formulate the gestures, the motion and the TV narration (Eco, 1976). Thus, pictures provide different kinds of information from those provided by verbal narration, since they are not very analytical, but catholic and polysemous (Martin, 1982).

Television is not necessarily mischievous. Besides, it has been indicated that watching TV programmes such as *Sesame Street* or *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has positive effects on children's social behavior (Friedrich-Cofer et al., 1979; Friedrich & Stein, 1975; Coates, Pusser & Goodman, 1976; Ball & Bogatz, 1970). However, young TV viewers are in a critical developmental stage; it is the period of their life when they develop their physical and social skills, and they shape their

attitudes, viewpoints and behaviors towards the world. At the same time, they draw information from any available source. As a result, factors such as the time that a child spends watching TV or the kind of programmes it watches play a significant role in its emotional, cognitive and social development, they affect the socialization process and they render TV a dominating source of role-models (Van Evra, 1990). Of course, TV watching does not have the same effects during all stages of children development (Sunderlin, 1969; Dorr, 1986; Liebert & Sprefkin, 1988; Livingstone, 1990). Moreover, it is worth noting that the modern pedagogy considers television not only as a valuable learning tool, but also as an essential learning object (Solomon, 1977).

### **The violent role of television**

Research conducted by the US National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) shows that the TV time allocated to cartoons related to war increased from 1.5 hour per week in 1982 to 43 hours per week in 1986. In 1980 children TV programmes displayed 18.6 violent actions per hour, while the number of violent actions increased to 26.4 per hour in 1990 (NAEYC, 1990). Moreover, the American child has watched 8,000 murders and 10,000 violent actions on TV by the time it finishes school (Huston et. al., 1992).

The literature reveals that even though viewing violent scenes can have serious long-term effects, making some young people comfortable with physical aggression and even promoting violent behavior, it can make others increasingly fearful of being victims. Such negative effects are related to (a) frequent viewing of excessively violent scenes in movies, TV programmes, cartoons or video games and (b) lack of interaction with family members or peers who provide mediating influence (Hepburn 2000). The relationship is much more consistent and substantial for children in middle childhood than in earlier ages. In other words, it has been proposed that there is a sensitive period between ages 8 and 12 during which children are particularly susceptible to the influence of television violence (Eron & Huesmann, 1986). Aggression in early adulthood is also related to the amount of violence watched in middle childhood, although it is not related to the amount watched in early adulthood (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972). The effects of television violence on children can be summarized in the following three points:

1. Children become less sensitive to pain and the problems of the others.
2. Children act more violently.
3. Children start being scared of the world around them.

Signorielli (1991) supports that the third point is the most dangerous.

### ***Aggressiveness: a "visual education"***

Today, we live in a world dominated by information and communication technologies, in a society of the wider proliferation of virtual reality and of the "imaging" of everything. New technologies have managed to create impressive

multimedia, recreational, informative or educational morphemes, which make more difficult than ever to distinguish the real from the virtual (Philo, 1990). In this respect, we seem to be hemmed in a world, which is beyond the limits of our perceptible ability.

Visual education constitutes the realization of the need to explore those human perceptible limits. Visual education is interested in visual thinking, in "the ability to see shapes as images of the patterns of forces that underlie our existence, the functioning of minds, the structure of societies or ideas" (Arnheim, 1969: 315).

The experimental and theoretical basis for visual education is being developed in psychology. Modern research is currently focused on the TV audiences (Morley, 1986), especially on the ways that image effects their everyday life.

Freud and Adler define aggressiveness and violence as an innate and acquired reactive behavior, but nowadays empirical evidence confirms that "aggressiveness is taught" (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). Even though the violent role models of television cannot be considered as the fundamental reason of violent behavior, they seem to form the ways of understanding and acceptance of violence as a social phenomenon (Wright & Huston, 1983).

#### **Aim of research**

Our research aim is to elucidate the opinions of infants, preschool teachers and parents about Pokemons and to reveal the ways in which Pokemons TV programme affects infants' behavior.

#### **Methodology and Sample**

Taking into account the objectives and the nature of our research, we decided that the use of more than one research tool was necessary. Thus, the research tools that we use in this piece of research are the interview and the observation. The advantages of the multi-methodological approach of the social phenomena have been showed and analyzed by many researchers and we think that there is no need for extensive reference to the relevant literature. However, it is worth noting that the application of a single research method may lead to the falsification of the investigated phenomenon or to the prevalence of the view about "methodological limitation". At the same time, such an approach may limit both the quantity and the quality of the data, which may describe the investigated issue (Anderson, 1990).

The use of one or more research tools is called triangulation. Although the specific technique is widely accepted among the scientific community, practically it is rarely used (Cohen & Manion, 2000). Denzin (1970) and Linn (1976) have presented a typology of the different forms of triangulation. In our research we use the form of "methodological triangulation", according to which one can use either the same method for different cases or different methods for the same study. Obviously, our research methodology falls into the second case. In this case, one utilizes different research methods, whose validity – according to Campell and



Fiske (1959) - is confirmed by the convergence of independent measurements of the same object. The selection of suitable research tools and the appropriate distribution of the sample can ensure a minimum of validity and reliability. Thus, in our case the parallel use of two research tools was considered as necessary, because the methodological triangulation seems to satisfy effectively the aims and the objectives of our research.

The interview is a fundamental and extremely useful research tool, which - according to Tuckman (1972), Cohen & Manion (2000) - can be used: as the main tool for data collection, as a tool for testing and explanation of hypotheses and finally as a tool for the definition of variables in multi-method researches. According to Kerlinger (1970), interview can be used for the exploration of unpredictable results, for the evaluation of other methods or for the thorough examination of respondents' motives and of the reasons, which make respondents answer in a particular way. We decided to use the method of semi-structured interview. The questions posed to the infants were focused mainly on whether they know Pokemons, whether they play Pokemons and why they like them. The questions posed to the preschool teachers were focused on the ways in which they deal with the "Pokemons" phenomenon in the classroom, on whether they themselves had ever watched the Pokemons TV programme, on the description of scenes that have impressed them. We also asked them to describe the role that parents play regarding the kind of TV programmes children watch. Finally, we asked parents whether their children watch the Pokemons TV programme, whether they notice any effects that the programme has on children's behaviour, whether they themselves had ever watched that programme, and whether they approve it.

Observation was used mainly for the empirical verification of the data elicited by the interview as well as for making possible the accurate description of children's behavior (Verma & Mallick, 1999). Observation took place in a period of 3 weeks during the teaching practice of preschool student teachers. Forms of children's behavior and verbal expressions, which were obviously related to Pokemons, were recorded using an observation sheet. The observation sheet was reconstructed after an initial 3 days piloting.

The sample of the research consisted of interviews from 18 infants, 7 parents and 15 preschool teachers. Three infants, two parents and two kindergarten teachers live in Thessaloniki and the rest respondents live in Florina, Greece. In addition, observation took place in 4 preschool classes (2 in the town of Florina and 2 in the city of Thessaloniki).

## **Results**

### **The observation data**

The analysis of the observation data showed that when playing, children imitate accurately the acts and the speech of Pokemons characters. They become violent and they repeat cliché phrases, which are used very often in the Pokemons TV programme. Children imitate the ways in which their TV heroes handle Pokemons

powers in combats by using whistles or small (imaginary) computers. They bring these whistles from their homes and they deny lending them to other infants (apparently because they fear that somebody else could become the "trainer"). The parts that the infants play rarely change, because they all want to be "trainers". And whenever an infant plays the part of an animal, it has been agreed that s/he will be the "trainer" afterwards. The infants use certain phrases and words that they hear in the TV program, such as "cheater", "thief", "liar" or "super-idiot". The names of Pokemons and trainers are mentioned constantly. It is worth noting that the reproduction of names and phrases takes place not only during playtime, but also throughout the school day. It is quite interesting that when the trainers are defeated in a combat, they reproduce with remarkable accuracy the following phrase: "Life is no more meaningful" and they pretend that they are crying. However, it has to be mentioned that this particular scene is reproduced ironically. Moreover, another scene that is reproduced repeatedly is the "electric shock". At this scene the infant "suffers electrocution" and after writhing for a few seconds on the floor, then it pretends it is dead. Finally, it is worth mentioning infants' obsession with plastic cards, which portray Pokemons. Infants have wide collections of these cards; they exchange them either for cards that they do not possess or for other things (such as pens, cheese pies, hairclips etc.) or even for a certain favor (for example "bring me my jacket").

As it was shown above, TV influence and children's tendency towards imitation have definite and characteristic results. Infants formulate a framework of behaviors and language, which obviously involves social values and structures, and it promotes the adoption of certain types of behavior. Research conducted by Koutsouvanou (1991), Friedrich & Stein (1975) as well as by de Villiers & de Villiers (1979) indicates that the effect of TV on children's language development is rather negative. Mere word and phrase reproduction, especially when it is not associated with a particular meaning or a communicative objective, restrains language development (Milkovich et al., 1975; Beentjes & Van der Voort, 1988). On the other hand, imitative acts such as "death feint" or "electrocutions", phrases such as "life is no more meaningful" and the exchanging of Pokemons cards are forms of behaviors, which show how susceptible to TV messages infants are.

In the field of visual communication, image is represented as a simple and harmless reproduction of reality, which is revealed directly and it can be conceived easily. However, it seems that image is not so innocent, since it represents "a reality through the image", it does not re-enact, but transforms and reproduces certain aspects of reality. Thus, through TV images children conceptualize only fragmentarily the symbolic and the ideological reproduction of a competitive society, which is legalized and idealized (Rubinstein & Brown, 1985). In this way, children tend to regard the violence, the values and the behaviors displayed on television as real (Van Evra, 1990; Barker & Petley, 1997; Charlton & O' Bey, 1997; Gauntlett, 1995; Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp & Rubens, 1982; Kuttschreuter & Baarda, 1992; Bryant & Zillmann, 1985).

### *The interview data*

The interview analysis showed children have an almost pathologic admiration for Pokemons, "trainers" and their action. In the question whether they like Pokemons and why, the answers show:

1. Admiration: *"They are amazing...I like them very much", "they are the best cartoons... they drive me crazy"*.
2. Identification - Imitation: *"I like the trainer...I'll be a trainer too and I'll wear a hat", "I like them...I don't want to be a trainer, but I like that the little girl wears red blouses and has her hair in a beautiful bun", "they are nice, but go away or else I'll send you an electrocution", "I like them because I like the little boy who has his eyes closed... he resembles me, but he is sleepy"*.
3. Aesthetic standards: *"... they are cartoons...they have beautiful colors and they are made for children", "they are beautifully designed... they are more beautiful animals than the real ones", "they are nice, but Digimons are better"*.

In the question whether they play Pokemons and why, the answers of the children were all affirmative, except one:

-(Irene): *I neither play Pokemons nor watch them on TV*

-(Kostas, another infant): *You are a liar!*

-(Irene): *I'm not! It's true!*

-(Interviewer): *It's ok, never mind!*

-(Kostas): *You are a liar! You watch them and you like it. There is no child who doesn't like Pokemons. I'll electrocute you!"*

When children talk about how they play Pokemons, they mostly describe scenes of violence: *"Do you want to play Pokemons? When I'll tell you: 'Pikatsou, electrocution!', you will fall dead", "...we fight, throw flagellums, launch attacks and electrocutions", "We kill each other, we hit ourselves on the floor and we take awards", "we throw stones and mud", "I don't answer to you... get out of my sight or I'll eliminate you"!* An infant simply referred to the Pokemons card playing: *"I collect Pokemons cards, I have them all...We can exchange cards if you want to"*.

Some answers reveal that children cannot distinguish the reality from the fantasy: *"...they are people like us, a little different", "they are little animals... not like these you know...we are not able to see them"* or *"I watch them on TV because Kostas told me to do so ...if you don't watch the Pokemons, you cannot have the pokedex"* (tiny computer database including the different kinds of Pokemons that is sold as a toy).

The interviews of preschool teachers showed that the Pokemons "phenomenon" is already an everyday problem for the educational process, since *"children bring pokemons into the classroom, they cannot stop holding them in their hands and playing with them, and in this way they destroy even the most organized activities"*, *"While everything is nice and calm, and everyone participates in the activities,*

someone will yell: 'Pokemons!', 'Death!', or something infernal like that, and all the kids start screaming and hitting themselves on the floor – Why do they do this?" or "They are driving me crazy... they talk about Pokemons all the time...they make noise...".

Furthermore, preschool teachers indicate that children reproduce violent scenes and actions, when they play Pokemons. In other words, they support that Pokemons promote models of violent behavior and aggressive thought (symbolic violence): "What kind of role models are Pokemons, if they make children to perceive killing each other as part of a game?" a teacher wonders, while another one points out that "It is the case of hidden violent role models and this fact makes them even more dangerous". A teacher from Thessaloniki notes that "it is unacceptable for a children TV programme to represent children as killers", while another one from Florina mentions that: "We try to bring children closer to the animals, while Pokemons present animals - killers, violent instruments of their trainers" and "beating, hitting, orders, death, war, electrocutions...this is the pedagogy of Pokemons".

Preschool teachers support that parents are responsible for the Pokemons "phenomenon" to a great extent: "Parents should be next to their children when they watch anything on TV and explain to them...help children understand what they watch...children with a little help can understand a lot of things", "I tell parents not to allow their children to bring Pokemons cards into the classroom, but it seems that I talk to the wall...", "Parents think: they are just kids, what can we do?" or "Parents haven't realized the extent of their responsibility". Finally, it is worth mentioning the opinion of a preschool teacher from Florina concerning the aesthetic standards of Pokemons: "Chinese piffles...ugly creatures...rubbish!".

On the other hand, parents state that they do not approve Pokemons, neither as a TV programme nor as a game: "What thing should I approve? The combats, the electrocutions or the obsession with the cards?" "Children spend the whole weekend in front of a television set...screaming, rolling on the floor...murders, dead bodies...what should I approve?". However, the same parents, who do not approve Pokemons, indicate that: "When I want to have some moments of peace, I rent some videotapes with pokemons", "What if they are screaming or shouting...there is nothing you can do about it, they are children, they want to play", "I bought them the toys as well, a Pokemons computer or something like this...just to keep them quite!". From the responses of the parents concerning whether their children imitate Pokemons we mention only one indicative answer: "I don't know if they imitate Pokemons, because I have never watched the TV programme. But perhaps you can tell me. My son hides his sister into the closet or under the beds and gives her certain orders and he calls her with a strange name...The other day he broke my daughter's tooth and he was screaming: I won her, I won her!". Finally, it is worth mentioning what a mother said to the

interviewer when she was asked why she did not try to turn the attention of her child on something else: "Now, you are a student, dear, and you are taking interviews. When you become a mother, come to talk to me again".

### **Discussion**

Children in their everyday life imitate the actions and the language of Pokemons TV heroes; they spend many hours in front of TV; they watch on video even old Pokemons episodes and they are obsessed Pokemons card collectors. Preschool teachers and parents report violent behaviors and accurate imitations as results of children's obsession with Pokemons. Parents particularly claim that they do not approve such kinds of TV programmes, however they do not do anything in order to prevent their children from watching them, mainly because TV watching seems to "keep parents out of trouble".

Pikatsou, Raitsou, Voulpix and Ash are the new virtual idols of young children - the heirs of Mickey and Donald. However, Pokemons are consistent with the rationale of war cartoons, discriminating clearly the good from the bad animals and the good from the bad trainers. This is why emblematic type of representation various symbolisms as well as various mutations of animals are utilized. Thus horror and pain are suppressed and the emphasis is placed on the decorative aspect of violent. It is the concept of "distance" - as R. Williams (1960) defined it - modulated by the commercialization of the image: the audience is aloof, "protected" from the reality of violence but exposed to an "antiseptic" type of representation of violence, experiencing the contradiction between horror and the pleasant representation of horror.

Pictures can be used to assert, or to deceive about facts from the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic point of view. Most of the strategies of pictorial information, which are utilized by the media, are indirect falsifications of reality, expressed by means of various indirect modes of conveying meanings (North 1997). Pokemons are the latest achievement of hero and idol industry, the new consuming product, which is targeted at the largest but weakest group of consumers, the children. Nowadays, comics or cartoon heroes, these powerful and admirable pictures seem to comprise a new domineering force over children's thoughts, dreams, language and life.

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## SECTION VIII

### TELEVISION AND EDUCATION