

Physical Familiarity in Kenyan Animation Character Design: Recreating Selected Characters in *Super Sema*

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Abstract

It is widely appreciated in film, television studies, and animation that a character serves as a means of telling a tale to the viewer in the media in which they appear. However, a character must be first relatable to convey the story. Consequently, this paper looks at the familiarity of characters in the Kenyan animation series *Super Sema*. The study was conducted in two phases, with the first phase aimed at determining whether the characters presented in the series elicited familiarity in a Kenyan child audience. The phase found that the degree of familiarity for the characters of the selected series was low. The study then moved to the second phase, where it recreated the characters to improve the characters' familiarity based on views and adjustments raised by the child audience. The study was guided by Expressionism Theory, Audience Reception Theory, Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, and Semiotics Theory.

The study used *Super Sema*, a Kenyan animation series, as the main film for this study. The series was selected since it is one of Kenyan animation series with a sustained plot and characters. A total of 4 main characters from the film were used in the study: Sema, MB, Tobor, and Babu. To achieve the intended objective, the researcher used school-going children (male and female) aged between 7-11 years. The participants were first shown the characters; then once the degree of familiarity was established, adjustments were made to the characters to improve their familiarity. A total number of 283 students were engaged in both focus group discussions and individual interviews, across five selected Kenyan schools. This study was qualitative as it examined the selected texts in depth, birthing further discussions and conclusions.

This research looked at the degree of familiarity achieved by the child audience using the alternative character design approach. Most participants noted familiarity with the recreated characters and a significant number cited that familiarity is a key concern when watching television, films, and animations. Different reasons have been discussed to justify their statements. The study also noted that child audiences have a critical eye when engaging with characters on the screen, and as such, the character designers have a role in ensuring that the preferences of the audiences in terms of familiarity are achieved.

Keywords: Animation in Kenya, Animation Character Design, Animation for Children, Child Audiences, Character Design Techniques, Familiarity in Kenyan Character Design

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1.0 BACKGROUND

The animation landscape in Kenya has varied accounts of when it began. The different accounts indicate that animation in Kenya was practiced from as late as 1990, with the introduction of the first animation school, *Mank & Tank*, which was set up by John Githongo and Martin Khamala. However, animation in Kenya began modestly when children's books featured drawn cartoons, political satire pieces, and entertainment books (Callus, 2018). The establishment of animation associations, film boards and commissions, broadcasting stations, and organizations like the Association of Animation Artistes in Kenya (founded in 2008), have all significantly contributed to the expansion and appreciation of animation in Kenya (Callus, 2018).

Beginning in 2011, the range of animated work produced in Kenya expanded in scope and expression, moving beyond traditional media forms like advertisements and children's programming to more provocative engagements with social and political issues through innovative and aesthetically diverse imagery (Callus, 2018). Mangeci Wutu, Ng'endo Mukii, Phoebe Boswell, Jim Chuchu, and Peterson Kamwathi are a few well-known Kenyan artists who have produced work that uses animation or animated techniques without necessarily labeling it. *Super Sema*, the animation under study, holds a significant position in the Kenyan animation industry with its rich content, with particular regard to its characters. The animation is centered on Sema's (protagonist) efforts to outsmart Tobor (antagonist) in his consistent greedy designs to subjugate, steal, or wreak havoc in Dunia.

As discussed above, great achievements have been made in the Kenyan animation industry. It is also crucial to bear in mind that films such as *The Lion King* and *Madagascar* have outrightly defined the feasibility of African themes (Kenya) being consumed globally. However, these crucial steps have been initiated by foreign nationals. In as much as this is the case, they are a suggestion that animation artists in Africa have a great opportunity to impact the global platform (Raugust, 2008).

Nevertheless, even with animation having the opportunity to operate on a global platform and enjoy international consumption, it is crucial to note that the different animated characters in varied regions can be exceptional in physique and personality. Hence, character design requires the designer to convey relevant information about a character. There are two major ways of presenting information about a character. The first one is explicit characterization, in which the audience learns about the character, their traits, and personality through what the screenwriter/director/ author says about the character through narration, monologue, or dialogue. The other way is that characters are delineated through their actions towards others and what they say about others and themselves. Hence, whether in a film, play, or novel, the screenwriter/director/playwright does not comment at all on the characters but instead expects that the viewer, audience, and reader will be able to deduce the attributes of the character from his actions and talk (Ballon, 2003). The study leaned towards ensuring that the Kenyan child audience fully understands a character's traits and background, among other relevant details, by looking at the physical presentation of the character, through evoking familiarity.

2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

Character design can be defined as a process of personifying and visualizing ideas and conceptions (Rall, 2018). Character design is one of the practices of visual arts and is predominantly used in the context of animation films and games that have fictional characters which the audience identifies with (Seegmiller, 2003). Barncroft (2006), defines character design as the process of coming up with a character for a specific purpose, either in TV, films,

or product design. He further says that this is achieved through determining a character's personality and traits and consequently conveying that through physical appearance. The study believes that character design is the method of clearly defining a character based on their traits through visual aspects presented in the final artwork of the development process. Character design has to do with crafting a character's complete concept, aesthetic, and artwork from the ground up.

2.2 Character Design Processes

Different character designers may apply different techniques and processes to achieve a particular character. Whichever technique or process, results should always try to lean on the relevance of the character to the story and the audience (Laybourne, 1979). Some of the common processes that one can apply include:

a. Three Dimensionality process

Egri (1969) presents considerations for the development of a character and refers to this as a bone structure for creating a three-dimensional character. The three-dimensionality of a character will lead to a well-defined and believable (familiar) character. This approach was adopted by the study to ensure that the analysis of the characters for the second objective of this study is achieved, which entailed analysing the different character traits of the selected characters. This approach was crucial as it offered the researcher an opportunity to fully analyse and understand the characters. The approach analyses the physiological, sociological as well as psychological traits of a character before creating them. This study employed this approach.

In line with Egri's approach, a character designer should therefore strive to see every character that they are designing in the three-dimensional realm. This study supposes that the presentation of a character in this realm visually will produce better results in terms of familiarity. The study strived to achieve a relevant balance of the three realms when recreating the characters.

b. Stereotypical process

According to Mattesi (2012), this process involves relying on the preexisting physical looks of characters being designed. Once this is determined, the character designer, guided by the different elements and principles of design and animation, engages in the design process. He further avows that by altering the commonalities, a character designer is in a great position to create very identifiable and memorable characters that leave a great mark on the audience. The designer, however, has the leeway to go against this, if the message being communicated is well done. This study agreed and employed these arguments since among the objectives, familiarity and non-familiarity of the characters was key, as well as engaging in determining the degree of familiarity of the recreated characters.

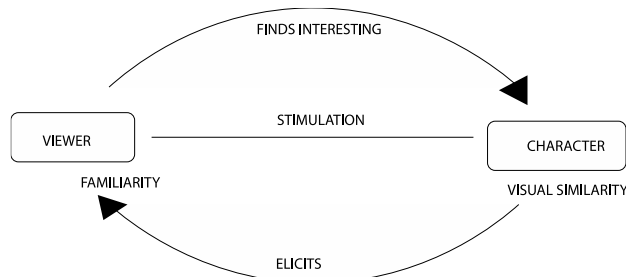
2.3 Character design and target audiences

Anytime a character designer sets out to work on specific characters, they should be able to first know who their character targets. This helps in having a concrete understanding of the audience's needs. Animation character design is a powerful tool for appealing to a variety of target audiences. Animators and designers can create characters that attract audiences and have a lasting impression by giving them distinct personalities, cultural representation, emotional resonance, and the use of cutting-edge trends and technology. Character design in Kenyan animation films, the study believes, is an important element that works towards drawing Kenyan child audiences in and enveloping them in imaginative worlds as the stories unfold.

A target audience can be grouped into age, religious inclinations, gender as well as socio-economic and political situations (Danner, 2007). All these important aspects help in shaping how a designer will work out their characters. In this study, for instance, the Child audience will fully represent these sections.

2.4 Familiarity with character design

According to Dubois et al (1999), familiarity can be defined as a sense of knowing that elicits meaning based on previous and/or common experiences. This study takes the view that as much as this is the case, familiarity does not directly mean a straight-ahead recognition of a character, but rather the child audience should think that the character looks familiar to them and not necessarily know the character presented to them at a personal level. This is supported by Hatley (2011), who says that as humans, we operationalize a familiar item, object, or situation as one that possesses fair visual similarity to past known items, objects, or situations that then lead to or prompt access to associated semantic knowledge for the viewer. The model for this argument is illustrated below.



Model 1: Familiarity with character design

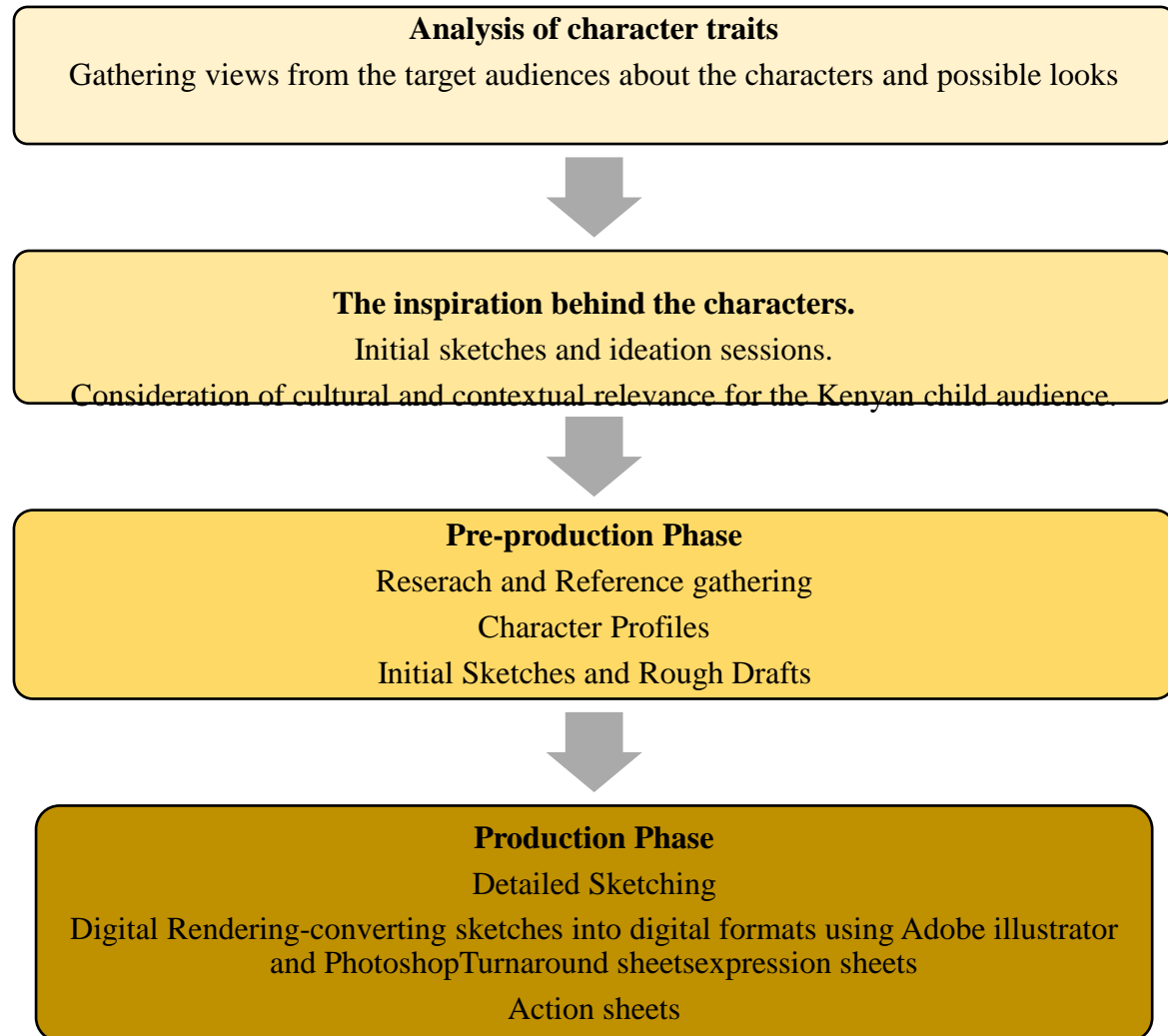
Dubois et al (1999) aver that interestingness implies the ability of an object or image to arouse responses other than those intended by its aesthetics. They further say that this leads to the feeling of interestingness, which gives emotional or conceptual meaningfulness. In addition to this, Hatley (2011) says that as much as apparent familiarity is likely to differ across individuals, there is ample agreement on what makes a personalized image (in this case 2d animation character) fascinate across individuals. The study considered the above arguments as crucial in the study since the study was centered on developing an alternative character design approach that was then tested on the child audience to further determine the degree of familiarity achieved.

2.5 Child audience and character design in Kenya

The Kenyan TV scene has changed from the analogue to the digital, providing the child audience with more access to different content, especially animation. Onywera et al (2012) note that in Kenya, as opposed to other foreign nations, there is no set time or limit for screen time for children. According to Healthy Active Childs Kenya (2016), Kenyan children spend more than two hours per day watching screens. This, therefore, puts the Kenyan child audience as a considerable consumer of content, especially animation films. With this increased demand for content, however, there is a need to factor their thoughts, needs, and preferences towards the content they consume. As they watch these films, they develop prosocial behaviours. According to (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013) young audiences tend to want to behave like the characters they see on screen as well as have wishful identification. Since animation films go beyond just entertainment, the researcher believes that aspects of familiarity will enhance how the child audiences easily interact as well as understand the characters. In addition to this, Rosaen and Dibble (2008) assert that younger audiences tend to have strong emotional

relationships with the on-screen characters. The study therefore recognizes the important role that character design processes and results have on the final product and hopes that the findings of this research will be instrumental in customizing characters that the Kenyan child audience can easily relate to and/or with.

2.6 Procedural character design approach used in the recreation of the characters.



2.7 Demographic Information of the Participants

This section presents participants' demographic information generated during the study. Demographic data helps to verify and generalize the results (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) to ensure the usability of the findings in prospective empirical or theoretical studies.

Table 1: Distribution of participants across different schools

Primary School	FGD participants	Interview participants	Total number of participants
Mululu	50	30	80
Givudiany	28	10	38
Lusengeli	60	30	90
Kasarani	30	10	40
KU primary	25	10	35
Total	193	90	283

3.0 DEGREE OF FAMILIARITY ACHIEVED ON DIFFERENT CHARACTERS

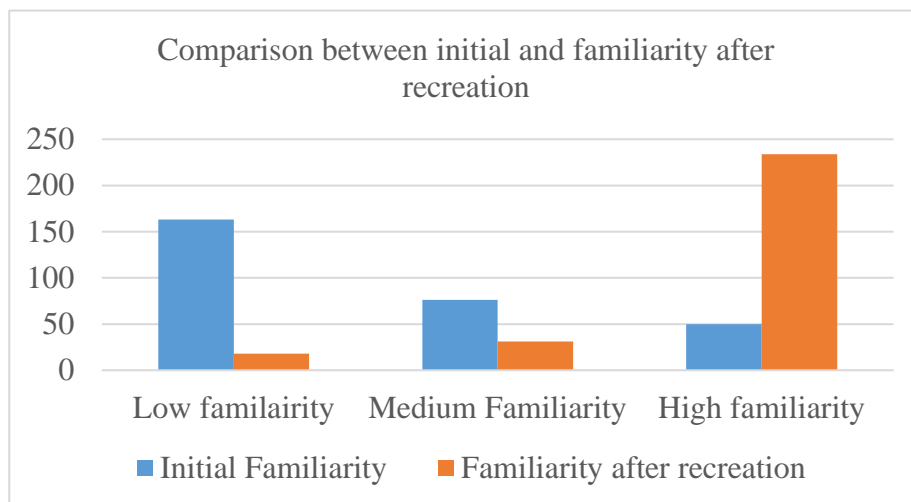
3.1 Degree of familiarity achieved on Sema.

To achieve this objective, the original and recreated characters were once shown to the participants. The images below show a comparison between the original and recreated characters.



Figure 1: Image showing the original and the recreated character, Sema

3.1.1 General familiarity with the recreated character



Comparison between initial familiarity and familiarity after recreating Sema

From the table and graph above, there was a significant reduction in low familiarity from 163 participants to 18 participants. This indicated a dramatic improvement in the lead character's recognition among the child audience.

The medium familiarity decreased from 76 participants to 31 participants. This further suggested that the recreation process successfully transitioned many participants from medium to high familiarity.

High familiarity increased substantially from 50 participants to 234 participants. This indicated that the recreation process made the character significantly more familiar and recognizable to the child audiences.

After re-creation, the male-child audiences' low familiarity decreased from 68 to 10, indicating a significant fall. The male medium familiarity fell from 36 to 13, while the high familiarity category went from 37 to 121, signifying a considerable increase in comfort and recognition among males.

The female child audiences' low familiarity dropped from 95 to 8, reflecting a significant decrease. The medium familiarity reduced slightly from 40 to 18 while the high familiarity jumped from 13 to 113, showing a massive increase in familiarity among female children.

This data shows that both genders showed marked improvements in familiarity, although the initial familiarity was somewhat higher among the female participants (low familiarity was higher, high familiarity was lower compared to males initially). After recreation, both genders exhibited a significant rise in high familiarity, suggesting that the redesign was universally effective.

The researcher concluded that the dramatic shift in familiarity levels underscores the importance of character design that incorporates the views of Kenyan child audiences and one that inclines towards having familiar visual elements. In addition, increased familiarity generally translates to better audience engagement and connection with the character, which is essential for the success of animation films to a Kenyan child audience.

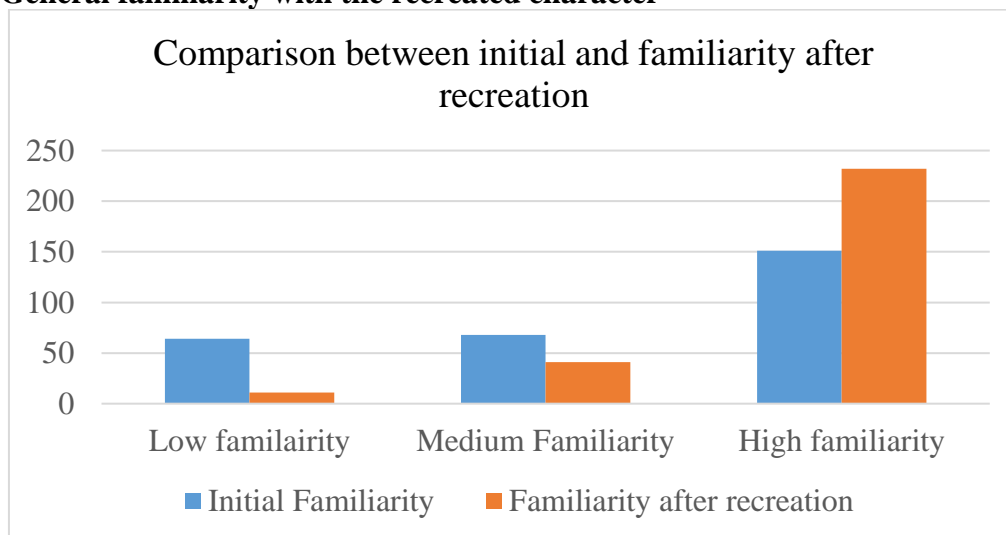
3.2 Degree of familiarity achieved on MB.

The images below show a comparison between the original and recreated characters.



Figure 2: Image showing the original and the recreated character, MB

3.2.1 General familiarity with the recreated character



Comparison between initial and familiarity after recreating MB

The table and graph show a large decrease in the number of children who found MB to be low familiarity, from 151 to only 11. This indicates that the recreation of this character helped improve visual cues that were more familiar.

Medium familiarity also decreased from 68 to 41 children. The shift indicated that many participants who initially found MB moderately familiar now found her highly familiar after recreation. The overall improvement came from the suggested adjustments raised by the participants.

The high familiarity experienced a substantial enhancement, which meant that the redesigned character had more familiarity with the child audience. MB (who is Sema's brother in the series) is a vital character who supports the main character. It is through him that some of Sema's traits are exuded. It was observed during the focus group discussions and interviews that the child audience, especially male participants, tended to be interested in this character.

The interviewees and focus group participants suggested changes to be made to MB’s hair (to be a darker shade of black), anatomical proportions (i.e. size and shape of the eyes, mouth to be thicker with fuller lips and a gap in his teeth as can be seen, e.t.c). The participants suggested the changes as MB was almost the same age as them, hence, the urge to have him look like them (the participants).

3.3 Degree of familiarity achieved on Tobor

The images below show a comparison between the original and the recreated character.

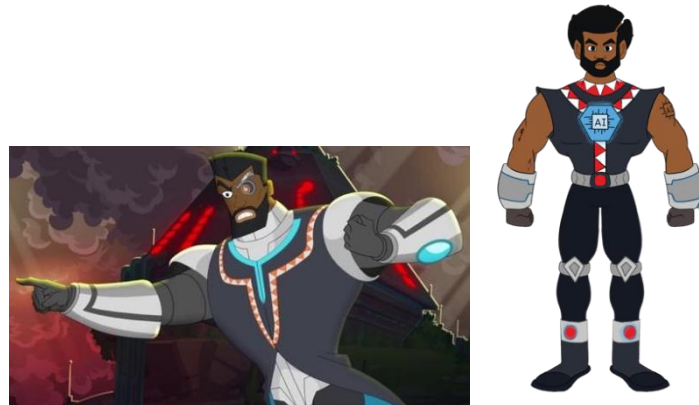
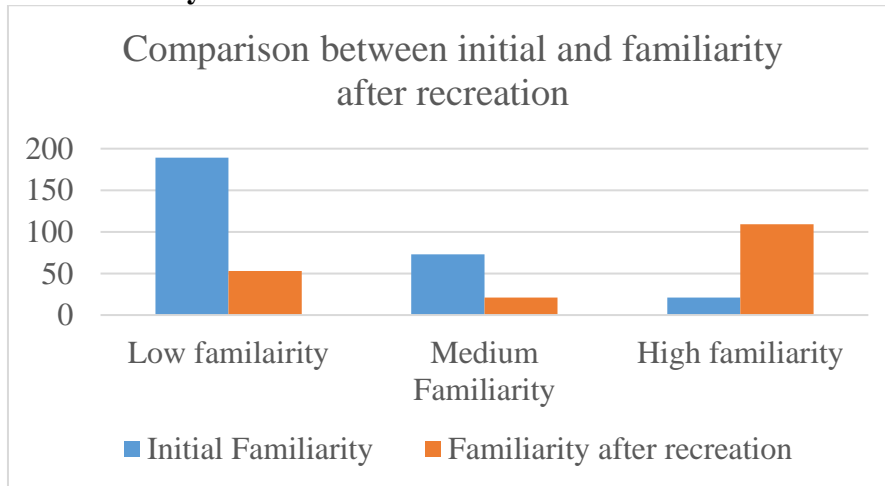


Figure 3: Image showing the original and the recreated character, Tobor

3.3.2 General familiarity with the recreated character



Graph 1: Comparison between initial and familiarity after recreating Tobor

As seen in the table and graph, there was a significant increase in general familiarity after recreation. The high familiarity rose from the initial 40 to more than 180. This meant that the recreation of the character was successful. During this exercise, there were sentiments from the child audience to support the data;

‘...I like the second Tobor; he is not too scary...’

Another participant added;

‘...the new Tobor is not very old. He looks better and does not make me hate the show...’

Another added;

‘...I like him this way more than the too scary one...’
 (Focus Group Discussion, Mululu Primary)

This feedback Tobor's design emphasizes how crucial semiotics is to character design. Kids view a less threatening Tobor as more relatable and interesting, thus they prefer him that way. This understanding improves usability testing by uncovering important design preferences, promotes audience reception theory by demonstrating how children actively perceive visual cues and supports cognitive development by offering emotionally safe visual stimuli. Through the iterative process of design, designers may better develop characters that connect with their younger audience by integrating these ideas. Such statements were taken to mean that if keen interest is put in how characters look, taking into consideration preferences of the child audience, then familiarity will rise.

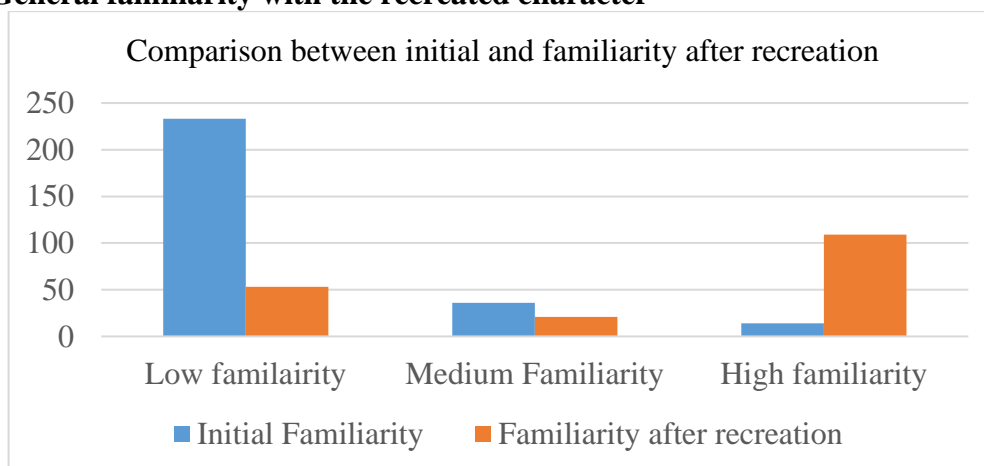
3.4 Degree of familiarity achieved on Babu.

The images below show a comparison between the original and recreated character named Babu in the television series.



Figure 4: Image showing the original and the recreated character

3.4.1 General familiarity with the recreated character



Graph 2: Comparison between initial and familiarity after recreating Babu

The comparison between the initial familiarity and the familiarity after recreation showed a great improvement. The low familiarity levels of this character greatly reduced from the initial one, having recorded a jump from 233 participants to only 18. This was a clear indication of the positive impact that the recreation process had.

Medium familiarity also experienced a shift, with the initial number of 36 dropping to 21. The difference of 15 participants shifting to the high familiarity only emphasized that the child audiences appreciated the changes made to the character.

The apparent high familiarity from 14 to 244 participants further underscores this success.

From this data, the significant increase in the high familiarity section also meant that the key visual elements that the child audiences had suggested were fully incorporated. These visual cues such as colour, hair, styles, costumes, symbols, and accessories resonated well with the children. They even went ahead and said that they could now connect and identify with the character. A participant noted that:

‘...between the two, I would choose to walk with the second Babu (implying the recreated one) ...because the first one scared me...people can fear him...’
(Individual interview, Losengeli Primary)

Another participant said;

‘...this one looks smart. He even has normal clothes....and a watch...’
(Individual interview, Losengeli Primary)

Another added that;

‘...the first Babu (initial one) was putting on a woman’s dress...he needs a trouser like this one. This new one is good. He has a good shirt and socks and sandals...’
(Individual interview, Losengeli Primary)

All these statements align with Audience Reception, Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development. It is through audience reception that the child audience perceived and interpreted the character since they have the cognitive ability to do so.

The big shift was necessitated by participants situating this character from their experiences, personal interests, and overall decency. They concluded that the recreated character felt more recognizable and familiar. This was important for them, with some saying that they would easily remember this character.

The data also presents a scenario with a balanced gender distribution, especially in the high familiarity category. This underscores the recreation's success in adhering to the suggestions, adjustments, and views of the child audience.

This study insists on including children’s views and reviews in character design. In addition, using consistent elements, relatable, and culturally significant elements is key in designing characters like Babu. Further, integrating a character into the story in relevant and meaningful ways is crucial to enhancing familiarity, story comprehension, and relatability. While integrating the character, the study also highlights the importance of consistency. As much as there can be changes as the story progresses, keeping the adjustments at a minimal rate is prudent. Through these efforts, audience engagement can be enhanced.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The study notes that the characters became substantially more familiar after they were recreated from the Kenyan child audiences' point of view. The procedural creation was necessary to achieve this objective. In addition, pertinent points were noted in the areas that elicited more familiarity and the impact of this familiarity, as noted by the participants. The study noted that the participants were more interested in having characters that exhibit familiar aspects visually.

As an illustration, consider gender, age, ethnicity, height, weight, and muscularity. Clothes, physical alterations, and accessories follow later. All of those are affected and formed by choices made regarding the character's position in the story and their created personal goals, reasons, professions, personalities, and other traits. Therefore, the study considers the familiarity of characters as a crucial element in ensuring that Kenyan child audiences fully relate and feel familiar with the characters presented to them and appreciate the films presented to them more. The key points noted in capturing the child audiences through familiarity lay on the following:

Body proportions, the shape of the nose, mouth, skin, and eye size were key in inferring the age, gender, and personality traits and, more importantly, enhancing familiarity. The study also noted that adding distinguished body parts such as fur, teeth, ear shape, and symbols was key in the way the child audiences viewed them, and therefore familiarity with these elements would mean that the child audiences get to understand the characters more and in turn follow the story closely.

Determining familiarity also required consideration of posture and facial expressions. It is important to make sure that the facial expressions and action lines are well-executed because young people may see some characters negatively. According to the study, Kenyan children's audiences are very critical and vigilant. Thus, they are interested in how characters post or strike extreme stances. This study found that young audiences would attempt to imitate the line of motions, attitudes, and facial expressions when presented. As a result, the audience can see a straight posture, sagging shoulders, or even raised eyebrows.

The importance of the costume and accessories was also mentioned. The character's grooming lays a solid basis on which young audiences can build their understanding of the character. The style, colour, and accessories that go with the outfit were all important factors in grooming. For instance, a participant mentioned that they thought the costume would be blown away by the wind in Babu's initial design. Therefore, in this child's opinion, the character designer's selection was unsatisfactory. According to the study, such an audience member won't be able to relate to this character. The audience felt at ease viewing the costume once a change was made to a pair of pants.

The study wishes to state that procedural character design approach is key in enhancing a character's familiarity and ensuring that the views of the child audience are incorporated. The procedural pipeline developed for this study provided a great opportunity for the researcher to enhance the familiarity aspect and capture the necessary details in the recreation process. The next chapter summarizes, concludes, and offers recommendations.

5.0 RECOMMENDATION

To begin with, characters are crucial in the meaning-making process of a film. The study recommends a keen look at how characters and their traits are presented visually. This means that character designers need to have a proper understanding of what needs to be included or excluded in a character to ensure that they fully express the intended meaning.

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