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The Impact of My Little Pony on Children's Mental Health

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Abstract: In an era where animations significantly influence children's development, *My Little Pony* has become a globally popular children's animation. This study focuses on how the positive values in the series affect children's mental health. Drawing on social learning theory, this study examines how these values influence children's mental health through content analysis on specific episodes such as *Hearth's Warming Eve* and the stories of Applejack and Fluttershy. The analysis finds that the animation improves three key mental health outcomes in the domain of social-emotional skill development, emotion regulation, and self-awareness. However, the paper also has limitations. The real-world social complexity and emotional problems are oversimplified and may lead to children's unrealistic self-awareness. In conclusion, given these findings, educators should integrate *My Little Pony* into mental health education programs while supplementing these programs with real-world examples to address risks of unrealistic self-awareness. The study also provides a foundation for future research on utilizing animated content to support children's psychological education.

Keywords: children's mental health, social-emotional learning, *My Little Pony*

1. Introduction

Since 2010, *My Little Pony* has enjoyed global popularity among both children and adults. The series follows Twilight Sparkle and Spike on their journey to Ponyville, where they learn the magic of friendship. There, Twilight Sparkle befriends five ponies, each representing different positive traits. Together, they face challenges, solve problems and strengthen their bonds through everyday adventures and collaborative growth. The show is replete with positive values such as friendship, courage, and kindness, primarily targeting children, especially girls.

Animation plays a transformative role in shaping the younger generation. It infiltrates children's lives in various ways, influencing their behaviors and changing their beliefs [1]. Through vivid plots and well-developed characters, the series teaches children important life skills, which are crucial for their mental health development.

This study focuses on how the positive values in *My Little Pony* affect children's mental health. Childhood is a stage of growth from immaturity to maturity, characterized by robust physical and intellectual development and high plasticity, making it an ideal period for education [2]. During this critical period, positive external guidance is paramountly significance for children. As a television animation, *My Little Pony* widely permeates in children's routines and cultural experiences . Excellent values in *My Little Pony* can positively influence children's psychological and behavioral development [3]. The friendship among the ponies can instruct children on building interpersonal

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relationships. Their teamwork plots illustrate the power of unity, and their self-discovery processes assist children in better understanding themselves. These values are closely associated with children's mental health, offering emotional support, enhancing social adaptability, and boosting self-esteem.

By examining the narrative content of *My Little Pony*,This article aims to analyze how characters' relationships influence children's mental health. It examines the impact of this animation through content analysis and relevant methods, and evaluates its role in promoting mental health. This research provides a theoretical foundation for the application of animations in mental health education.

2. Positive mental health outcomes in *My Little Pony*

2.1. Social-emotional skill development

Children's social emotional learning refers to the process by which children acquire and effectively use knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for self-understanding, emotional regulation, goal achievement, empathy expression, positive relationship building and responsible decision-making [4].

In the pivotal episode *Hearth's Warming Eve* which portrayed the main ponies (Twilight Sparkle, etc.) resolving tribal conflicts and establishing the land of Equestria by assuming important roles such as that of Four Leaf Clover, reflecting the process of children's social-emotional learning.

According to the episode, during *Hearth's Warming Eve* in Equestria, the ponies prepared for the festival. The main characters were invited to perform a show about the founding history. There were once three tribes: Pegasi, Earth ponies, and Unicorns. However, the blizzard suddenly struck leading to disputes among the tribes over resource allocation and leadership. As a result, they lost new land and took shelter in a cave, while the leaders were frozen due to their quarrels. A unicorn sage noticed that the disputes had summoned the Windigo. Eventually, the assistants used friendship magic to dispel it, and the leaders named the land "Equestria"as a symbol of unity and cooperation. By immersing viewers in this story, the animation provides children with examples of empathy and collective problem-solving,which are core competencies of social-emotional development.

2.1.1. Conflict resolution demonstration

In the story, the intense conflicts among the three tribes, arising from competing interest conflicts and differences in ideas, introduce children to the realistic of interpersonal communication and group life. A scholar points out that cartoons serve as powerful educational tools expose children to diverse social scenarios and enabling them to differentiate between virtues and vices [3]. Conflicts are an inevitable part of life. Through the realistic portrayal of conflicts and differences in animations, children are less likely to be overly alarmed when conflicts occur and are more likely to face and handle them with a calm and rational attitude when encountering similar situations in reality.

2.1.2. Cooperation awareness promotion

The assistants of the three tribal leaders working together to dispel the Windigo with the power of friendship vividly demonstrate the strength of unity to children. Studies have demonstrated that children construct their own cognitive system by observing the surrounding environment, with their behavior patterns highly influenced by the interactions they observe around their environment [5]. As a medium that children frequently engage with, the content presented in animations becomes an object of their learning and imitation. When children witness the scene where the assistants overcome the Windigo through close cooperation, it is likely to stimulate their inner willingness to cooperate. They may realize that collaborating with others is an effective approach to problem-solving when facing difficulties, and thus be more inclined to attempt cooperation with their peers in real life, enhancing their teamwork awareness.

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2.1.3. Empathy cultivation

Dai suggests that the various positive emotions presented in animation plots can have an empathetic effect on children, thereby being unconsciously absorbed and internalized by child audiences [6]. Children can experience the rich emotional changes of the characters during the leaders' reconciliation process, from mutual accusations to understanding and acceptance in the aforementioned plot, thereby cultivating their empathy. They can learn to think from others' perspectives and understand others'feelings, which positively impacts the promotion of the development of children's social interaction skills.

2.2. Emotional regulation ability enhancement

Huang defines emotion regulation as a process whereby individuals monitors, evaluates, and regulates emotions through strategies to achieve special purpose and changes characteristics such as emotional intensity [7]. This represents a comprehensive process that involving the discovery, understanding, and the implementation of relevant measures to regulate emotions, requiring both initiative and subjectivity.

The narrative featuring Applejack, Fluttershy, and the Kirin exemplifies this emotion-regulation framework.according to the plot that they searched for herbs in the treacherous mountains to treat sick ponies. When Applejack and Fluttershy embarked on their journey, Applejack was straightforward and eager, while Fluttershy was kind but timid. At a narrow bridge, their clashing personalities led to an intense conflict, with anger escalating. In the forest, they encountered a Kirin that was sensitive to emotions. Hurt by the past angry words, Applejack and Fluttershy scared the Kirin away. However, as the story progressed, the two characters reflected on their behavior, calmed their emotions, and patiently apologized to the Kirin. The Kirin also gradually learned to confront its emotions during this process and was moved to assist them in completing the task. It provided children with referential emotion-regulation strategies.

2.2.1. Empathetic skill augmentation

When children watch the above-mentioned content, they can gain insights into the understanding of emotions and regulation. By observing the emotional responses of characters in cartoons when facing various situations, children can gradually understand the causes of emotions [8]. The story clearly shows the contextual triggers for emotional responses. Applejack's anger stemmed from her eagerness for the task and dissatisfaction with Fluttershy's slow actions. Fluttershy's fear originated being in a dangerous situation on the wooden bridge, while the uneasiness of the Kirin originated from the painful experience of being verbally abused by ponies in the past. By watching such plots, children can recognize that emotions do not arise without reason but are closely related to specific events, scenes, personal personalities, and experiences. This enables them to approach the emergence of their own emotions with a composed mindset.

2.2.2. Emotion self-regulation learning

In terms of emotion regulation learning, at the beginning of the story, Applejack and Fluttershy lost control of their emotions, resulting in constant arguments, task delays, and creating a tense and oppressive atmosphere. As the story unfolds, the characters begin to reflect and self-regulate. Applejack and Fluttershy attempted to regulate their emotions, then after rational thinking they employed rational thinking to solve problems. The Kirin also learned to control its anger during the interaction. This provides children with acquirable emotion-regulation methods. A study shows that animations play a significant role in promoting the development of children's emotion regulation

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ability [8]. When watching animations, children can master methods of regulating emotions by observing the strategies used by cartoon characters, thus, enhancing their own emotion-regulation ability. When they experience emotional excitement, they can follow the example of the characters in the story, calm down first, analyze the problem after their emotions subside, and then seek solutions, so as to avoid being unduly influenced by emotions and better handle various situations in life.

2.3. Self-awareness development

Self-awareness is the cognition of an individual about oneself and the relationship with the surrounding world. The constrcut, influenced by environmental factors, self-cognition, self-emotion, and self-will [9]. Applejack and her pony friends in the episode *Ponyville Rodeo* offer insights into children's self-awareness development.

In Season 2, Episode 14, of *My Little Pony*, Applejack competed in Canterlot's Equestria Rodeo on behalf of Ponyville, eager to win and bring honor to her town and friends. However, her loss led to self-doubt, and she left for Dodge Junction on Equestria's border, working anonymously. Her friends, noticing her absence, searched for and found her. Their kindness helped Applejack realize that her value was not solely determined by the outcome, and she re-accepted herself. By depicting this journey, the animation encourages children to foster introspection and adaptive self-regulation.

2.3.1. Proper attitude towards failure

Watching animations is a process of promoting self-awareness development for children, and animations have a profound impact on children's self-awareness [10]. Children are likely to encounter failures similar to Applejack's during their growth. By watching her story, children can understand that failure is a common occurrence in life and not the end of everything. Children learn to avoid self-denial after single setbacks. Thus, when encountering failure, they can adopt healthier attitudes rather than becoming excessively frustrated or self-abandoning.

2.3.2. Reflection on self-worth

When children watch cartoons that contain positive values such as family affection and friendship, they will be influenced by these values, making them realize their value in interpersonal relationships rather than just pursuing personal achievements [11]. Applejack's persistence in proving her value through physical labor and the plot of her friends helping her understand her significance can inspire children to think deeply about their own values. Through the series, children understand that self-worth transcends achievements. Everyone is unique and valuable, reducing reliance on external recognition to affirm oneself.

2.3.3. Recognition of the role of friendship

Furthermore, children are inspired and guided by watching the characters' performances in cartoons, engaging in cognitive exploration of the objective world by emulating characters'actions. In this process, they deepen their understanding of themselves [10]. The plot that Applejack's friends persistently searching for and helping Applejack overcome difficulties shows children the crucial role of friendship in the process of self-awareness development. This helps them understand that when they are confused or experiencing self-doubt, friends' support serves as a powerful backup. It can also enables children to take the initiative to seek help from friends when they needed. Through the feedback of others in social interactions, they can understand themselves more comprehensively and accurately and promote the improvement of interpersonal communication ability and self-awareness.

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3. Limitations and practical considerations

Despite the fact that *My Little Pony* has demonstrated beneficial impacts on children's social-emotional development, emotion management, and self-awareness, it has notable limitations. Interpersonal relationships and teamwork are subject to more complex factors in real-world social which the animation may oversimplifies. Moreover, the ways in which characters deal emotion-regulation strategies are portrayed as straightforward solutions while the emotional problems in reality prove more complex, influenced by multiple factors such as family and school. Relying solely on imitating the emotion management methods of animation characters may not be sufficient to address emotional dilemmas in real-life situations.

In addition, the characters distinctive traits and abilities in the animation may lead children over a simplistic and polarized self-awareness model. Such oversimplified role models often lack the nuanced complexity of real-world individuals may lead to distorted self-evaluations. Children may develop unrealistic expectations or cognitive biases about themselves due to excessive reference to animation characters. To some extent,this phenomenon contributes to the occurrence of the tension between idealized representations in media and the multifaceted nature of human behavior.

4. Conclusion

This study systematically investigates how *My Little Pony* influences on children's mental health. Through content analysis of specific episodes, it uncovers three key contributions. In terms of social-emotional skill development, it provides models for conflict resolution, promotes cooperation awareness, and cultivates empathy. Regarding emotion regulation, it helps children understand the causes of emotions and offers learnable self-regulation methods. For self-awareness, it enables children to face failure correctly, think about their values, and recognize the importance of friendship in self-awareness development.

However, this research has its limitations. The analysis mainly focuses on a few selected episodes, which may not comprehensively represent the entire series. Future research could expand the scope of analysis to cover more content. Additionally, the study mainly relies on theoretical analysis and lacks empirical research methods such as surveys and experiments. To improve this, future studies design might surveys to collect data on children's actual learning and growth after watching *My Little Pony*, or conduct experimental studies to more accurately measure the impact of the animation on children's mental health.

While *My Little Pony* shows the potential to contribute to children's mental health, its benefits require guidance to maximize its benefits while mitigating potential risks. Future research should focus on finding ways to optimize these animated content in mental health education by integrating real-world complexity and child-specific Variations. This can help children better absorb the positive values from the animation and avoid potential negative impacts, ultimately promoting their healthy mental development.

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